

**“BEING A BETTER TONGAN”  
IDENTITY, SPORT AND THE TONGAN DIASPORA**

**A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE DIVISION OF THE  
UNIVERSITY OF HAWAI‘I AT MĀNOA IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF**

**MASTER OF ARTS**

**IN**

**PACIFIC ISLANDS STUDIES**

**DECEMBER 2016**

**By**

**Joseph Hala’ufia**

**Thesis Committee:**

**Lisa Uperesa, Chairperson  
Terence Wesley-Smith  
Roderick Labrador**

## **Dedication**

I dedicate this to my family for all the guidance, love and support they have given me over the years and continue to do so.

I wrote this so that the next generation would have a more clear picture of who they are and who they can be.

## Acknowledgements

A warm mahalo nui loa to the kānaka maoli of the Kingdom of Hawai'i. I thank the indigenous people of Hawai'i first and foremost because they have played host to me for two years now and continue to treat me with the utmost respect and warmest aloha. I pray that one day I will be able to see the sovereign Kingdom of Hawai'i arise again and you all would be free from the shackles of colonialism one day.

Thanks to Dr. Lisa Uperesa, Dr. Terence Wesley-Smith, and Dr. Roderick Labrador for being a wonderful committee and having more faith in me than I ever did in myself. Your advice, guidance, and support of my research interests has always been so sincere that I am still astounded you all stuck with me for these two and a half years.

Thanks to Coco Needham for being the heart and soul of the Center for Pacific Islands Studies. If it wasn't for you, I wouldn't have been able to print the numerous drafts of this that I needed to edit and I don't think anyone would get anything done. I don't know how CPIS will move on without you, but I thank you for your service to us, the students. You are the epitome of having a servant's heart.

Thanks to my Dad and Mom for their example of unconditional love, Ame for visiting me in Hawai'i when no one else would, Kristie for keeping me up to date on the latest family news, and Sam for always picking up my calls the second time I call. I love you all and am happy that I finally have something you guys can cheer for me in.

Thanks to the Hale Manoa 12<sup>th</sup> Floor Diamond Head Kitchen Crew. I have enjoyed all the meals we have shared and will continue to share. You guys are the best, even if you are all too old to be making late night McDonald's runs.

Thanks to the UH Equipment Room for being the best workplace, a sports fan like me, could ask for. I have learned so much about people working with you all that I don't think I could have completed this without the experience I gained from all those early morning practices and late night games.

A very special thank you goes to all my informants, people I now call my friends, for this thesis. I appreciate how open and honest you all were with me and am glad to know I am not the only Tongan kid out there that still can't speak Tongan and is ok with that.

Finally, thank you to my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ for it is through Him that all things are possible and He who grants me the strength to do the impossible.

## **ABSTRACT**

The narrative of Tongan migration to the United States has been unique to the immigrant narratives of the past. Tongans engage in a constant cycle of exchange of products and people between Tonga and its diasporic communities. All with the same goal: be “better” Tongans. This ideology for migration has created an interesting phenomena for diasporic communities in the United States as they navigate being “better” Tongans. Examined through the lens of sport, a vital pillar of social integration in the Tongan diasporic community, interviews from diasporic Tongans share the experience of living up to being “better” Tongans, both consciously and unconsciously. Engaging with issues of cultural identity, race and racialization, and social mobility, diasporic Tongans have found that being a “better” Tongan can occur in a variety of ways despite the complications that sport introduces.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|   |           |
|---|-----------|
| Dedication                                | ii        |
| Acknowledgements                          | iii       |
| Abstract                                  | iv        |
| Preface                                   | vii       |
| <b>CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION.....</b>       | <b>1</b>  |
| The Kingdom of Tonga                      | 3         |
| Oceanic Migration                         | 6         |
| Tongan Migration                          | 7         |
| Tongan Diasporic Communities              | 9         |
| Sport in the Tongan Diaspora              | 11        |
| Sports Focus                              | 13        |
| Personal Purpose                          | 14        |
| Significance                              | 15        |
| Research and Methods                      | 16        |
| Limitations                               | 18        |
| Overview                                  | 19        |
| <b>CHAPTER 2: CULTURAL IDENTITY.....</b>  | <b>21</b> |
| Tongan Cultural Identity                  | 23        |
| Seini                                     | 23        |
| Formation: Community in Sport             | 25        |
| Losa                                      | 26        |
| Eseta                                     | 30        |
| Regulators and Rebels                     | 32        |
| The Haka                                  | 33        |
| Vake, Pila, and Loa                       | 35        |
| Cultural Performers or Cultural Erasures? | 37        |
| Conclusion                                | 38        |
| <b>CHAPTER 3: RACE.....</b>               | <b>40</b> |
| The “Noble Savage” and Colonial Legacies  | 41        |
| Tongan Bodies                             | 42        |
| Vake                                      | 42        |
| Pacific Islander Male Bodies              | 45        |
| Sela                                      | 46        |
| Pacific Islander Female Bodies            | 49        |
| Gendered Roles in Sport                   | 50        |
| Loa                                       | 51        |
| Sport as Social Access                    | 55        |
| Conclusion                                | 55        |

|  |           |
|--|-----------|
| <b>CHAPTER 4: PATHWAYS TO SUCCESS.....</b> | <b>57</b> |
| Tongan Success                             | 57        |
| Vehicle for Socioeconomic Success          | 58        |
| Loa Revisited                              | 59        |
| Stuck or Options?                          | 61        |
| Pila                                       | 62        |
| Soane                                      | 64        |
| All in the Family                          | 66        |
| Lia and Sesi                               | 68        |
| Brothers and Sisters                       | 71        |
| Ele  | 72        |
| Pita                                       | 77        |
| Different Approaches, Same Results?        | 80        |
| Conclusion                                 | 81        |
| <b>CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION.....</b>          | <b>83</b> |
| Findings                                   | 84        |
| Future Projects                            | 86        |
| Final Thoughts                             | 88        |
| Postface                                   | 89        |
| <b>BIBLIOGRAPHY.....</b>                   | <b>91</b> |

## *Preface*

Kids scrambled about as recess raged on. The calamity of children clambering onto the sturdy, metal play structure and expertly evading each other in overlapping games of tag caused a commotion like no other. The warm weather and clear skies were indicative of a late-August morning, as well as an energetic and enthusiastic herd of kids raring to unleash their pent up energies. The chaotic play structure lay just beyond the sea of black asphalt. On this asphalt lay the outlined islands of basketball courts sporting basketball hoops, almost tree-like with some children lazing in the sparse shade they provided on a warm day. On one of these courts, a group of boys had gathered with the desire to play a game of basketball. However, a conflict had arisen among them that kept them stranded on opposite sides of their little island.

“He can’t be on your team! He’s too good!” One boy complained.

“Nah, it’s ok. We’ll beat them still!” The boy’s friend stated slyly and confidently, as he patted his friend on the back. “They always play together, it’s ok.”

The boys from the group across from the complaining boy and his friend snickered. No matter what the others tried, they always ended up sticking together because they never relented on their team choosing.

“Tongans vers all again!” One of the opposing group cheerfully yelled. This was met with giggles and laughs from the entire young group of boys except for one.

The newest boy of the group had only been going to this new school for two weeks and he had already been absorbed into this band of boys. Puzzled by the accusations hurled at them from their soon-to-be opponents, he turned to one of the boys next to him.

“What does he mean Tongans vers?” The new boy asked.

“He means us. It’s us against everyone else.” His friend replied.

“But... why can’t we just mix the teams?” The new boy questioned.

“Because then it’s not fun! Tongans are good at sports and when we’re all on the same team, we win.” His friend stated confidently. “Let’s play! We have to go soon!”

The boys played fiercely. Pursuing the round, orange ball with abandon, there was always a cluster of boys attacking the ball. However, the bell rang shortly ending their game abruptly.

“Same thing lunchtime!” One of the Tongan boys triumphantly yelled as the boys dispersed to their classrooms.

As the boys walked back, the new boy walked turned to his friend.

“So, same teams at lunch?” He asked.

“Yup, we always play together. It’s cuz we’re Tongan, we gotta stick together!”



## **CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION**

For many immigrants in the United States, the story has been the same. They came to live the “American dream.” Immigrants came to the United States for many reasons, but the most alluring was that of the freedoms the country provided. The United States offered an escape from religious persecutions for some and the chance to escape poverty and create a more financially stable life for others. In addition to coming to the United States, immigrants also severed their ties with their homelands in order to assimilate to their new nation. These are the most popular migrant narratives shared in the mainstream American conscience.

However, this only holds true for the migrant narratives before the Hart-Celler Act of 1965, which dissolved the National Origins Formula that barred mass immigration outside of Western Europe (Ngai, 2004). This changes when looking exclusively at Oceanic migration.

Most research approaches to immigrant narratives have been conventional in their methods by depicting the lives of immigrants in their homeland, their movement to a new land, and their experiences in a new land and society (See Small, 2011). This linear narrative works for many diasporic communities that choose to make permanent moves. However, from an Oceanic perspective, this does not encompass the entirety of the diasporic experience.

The Tongan diaspora is a prime example of this. Because of the cultural values of familial obligation and the common practice of remittance, Tongan migrant communities are strongly tied to their homeland even decades after they originally dispersed (Lee, 2003). Tongan families are transnational as seen in the work of Cathy Small, Helen Morton Lee, and Niko Besnier. People and goods cycle between the homeland and diasporic communities, which muddles the linear immigrant narrative and complicates the lives of the generations born outside of Tonga.

For those who are raised “between two shores,” life is far from simple as they find themselves balancing among multiple worlds (Lee, 2003). The constant cultural dissonance introduces issues of identity formation for migrant peoples like diasporic Tongans. In spite of the relative newness of these issues of diasporic identity, they are also well-charted waters in Oceania (See Lee 1998; Labrador 2015).

With that being said, I focus on the reason Tongans left their homeland in the first place: “to be better Tongans.” As Cathy Small states, “Tongans left Tonga to be better Tongans-to develop themselves and their families and to improve their lot and status among other Tongans.” (Small, 2011: 186). While it is not the sole reason for migration, it is an overarching one that encompasses many of the reasons Tongans leave. “To be better Tongans” unites the wider implications of migration as a socioeconomically and culturally profitable avenue for Tongans.

This ideal that many migrant Tongans aspired to is the core of my work. The pursuit of being a “better” Tongan has shaped the Tongan diasporic identity and experience for a new generation of Tongan youth. The aspiration to be a “better” Tongan is the overarching theoretical framework of my thesis. I illustrate this through sport and how the pursuit of being a “better” Tongan has adversely affected a new generation of diasporic Tongans in the United States.

In regards to this, sport has been a major vehicle Tongans have used “to be better Tongans” and have done so with varying results. I investigate diasporic Tongans’ engagement with sport in order to see how they have either fulfilled or failed the original goal of being “better” Tongans.

In my own experience, sport has provided a means for which diasporic Tongans invent themselves and create their own cultural space. The sporting lens is an important perspective for the diasporic experience because it is not inherently a cultural institution. While it could be

argued so, sport has been versatile in its appeal and diverse in its usage. This is where my research significantly departs from previous works done regarding identity and Oceanic diaspora: its focus on sport gives a unique glimpse into the diasporic experience from a burgeoning field of study.

In this introductory chapter, I review the history behind the migration of the Tongan people and the diasporic communities they have formed. I then discuss the importance of sport as medium of study and its role in the contemporary Pacific. I follow this with my own personal reasons for embarking on this project. After, I account for the research questions addressed and the research methods used. Finally, I note some of the limitations that have emerged with my research and provide an overview of the entirety of this project.

### *The Kingdom of Tonga*

Located in the southern Pacific Ocean, with its closest neighbors being Samoa and Fiji, is the Kingdom of Tonga. It holds the auspicious title of being the only nation of the Pacific to have never been formally colonized, although it was under British protection for a majority of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Tongan people readily adapted to the practices foreigners introduced, such as Christianity, because of the flexibility of the customary Tongan society (Tupouniua, 1977). Maintaining its sovereignty was a key factor for the preservation of Tongan culture.

The preservation of Tongan culture is important to note because it gives way to the practice of anga fakatonga, or “the Tongan way.” Helen Morton describes anga fakatonga as such:

Anga fakatonga is used to identify what is seen as a uniquely or specifically Tongan way of being and can be used in any context, from statements of key Tongan values to a description of the Tongan way of peeling vegetables. Tongans

speak of anga fakatonga as timeless and essential, yet they are also well aware of its multiple interpretations and historical transformations (1996: 20)

In Tonga, anga fakatonga teaches and socializes Tongan people early on in childhood to understand their place in all contexts. One of the most significant contexts is the family. In this respect, Tongans are well versed in serving the needs of the family over their own individual needs. This practice of familism is an important branch of anga fakatonga and a major determinant in dispersal practices such as remittances that will be discussed further (Small, 2011).

Understanding one's place in multiple contexts is learned out of faka'apa'apa, which can be roughly translated as respect, for anga fakatonga, but also to aspire for "the ideal of chieflyness" (Lee, 1996: 251). "Chieflyness" is an aspect of Tongan culture in relation to its hierarchical structure and how a person of higher rank should act. Because of its monarchical government, Tonga is a deeply stratified society in which all Tongans are of a certain class or rank. It is significant to remember that while it is a goal to aspire for such "chieflyness," one must never actually "appear to be aiming above their social rank and status" (ibid, 25). The practice of anga fakatonga and aspirations of "chieflyness" come to prominence in the diaspora as central areas of conflict that will be discussed at length throughout this work. The preservation of Tongan culture, however, stands in tension with the growing anxieties of globalization that has arisen in any modern-day nation.

Niko Besnier's *On The Edge Of The Global* broaches the global issues that surface within Tongan society (2011). From the marketplace to the fitness gym, the global presence is felt through the tinned food and secondhand clothing being sold to the lifted weights as gym patrons aspire for a healthier lifestyle. It is in these routine circumstances that modernity is apparent

within the islands of Tonga. The tinned food and secondhand clothing come from changing tastes due to global exposure. The call for healthier lifestyles and daily exercise is completely counter-cultural to the Tongan way of life. The main reason being that it calls attention to individual wellbeing that can be considered selfish and not of *anga fakatonga* (ibid, 186). This familial and communal view of one's body is an important perspective in throughout this work.

The presence of modernity within the islands of Tonga is significant because it denotes the connection between the islands and the global community. Many Pacific Island nations are framed as being isolated and far-removed from the greater workings of the global community (ibid). This is untrue. Tonga, and the Pacific Islands, in general, are far more ingrained with global happenings than given credit for. As Besnier discusses, "it is not just the global that localizes, but also the local that globalizes" (ibid, 232). In this way, we see that in spite of its history of presumed isolation, Tonga is a site where modernity is bred and thrives.

This is further stated as Besnier describes the concept of "bifocality":

It is not just them whose vision is plural but also those whose movements are not straightforwardly characterizable as exile, as well as those who remain in place, who are equally cognizant of other perspectives on who they are and what they do, of other possibilities for action, and other contexts for understanding the present. All engage in what can be termed 'bifocality.' (Ibid, 13)

For both diasporic Tongans and those that remain in the homeland, all are conscious of their local events and interactions but do so with an aim on a global goal. While Besnier focuses his work more so in the homeland, he still recognizes the "bifocality" of both Tongans at home and abroad. This "bifocality" fuels many of the actions of Tongans as they participate in a constant exchange of goods, ideas, and people between the homeland and diasporic communities. Thus, the Kingdom of Tonga has been a conglomerate of local and global influences that have given both reasons to stay and leave.

In addition to the “bifocality” of Tongans, a lack of any major colonial legacy and influence has permitted the preservation of Tongan culture. Anga fakatonga and the hierarchical structure of Tongan society is evidence of this remaining largely intact and continuing to shape Tongan lives, for better or worse (Morton, 1996). This presents a culturally generated reasoning for Tongans to disperse as they do so out of family obligation among other reasons, both within and out of their own control. The constant exposure to the greater global community is an example of this. While this exposure makes the global community more accessible to the Tongan people, it is also a result of the growing globalization and migratory patterns of the Tongan people. Although Tongans paint themselves as being on the margins of the global community, they prove to be exemplary of the pervasive impact of modernity and globalization (Besnier 2011). It is clear that there are both potential internal and external motivations for migration, but I now turn to the global community and examine its conducive contexts for Tongan migration.

### *Oceanic Migration*

Before exclusively discussing Tongan migration and diaspora, I place it within the greater region of Oceania. I do this because many of the migration patterns that Tongans follow are similar to their neighbors in their “sea of islands” (Hau’ofa, 1993). Having navigated the waters and inhabited the islands of Oceania for over three thousand years, the people of Oceania are accustomed to large-scale migrations. For the aim of my work, I focus on the contemporary movement of the people of Oceania from the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century and onwards because many recent events and developments within Oceania are relevance to current Tongan diasporic communities.

The need for labor in Aotearoa/New Zealand and the restructuring of immigration policies limiting the entrance of peoples from the Asia and Pacific region and unskilled laborers

to the United States and Australia during the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century spurred the migration of Pacific Islanders, primarily from the southern and central Pacific, to the outer rim of Oceania (Lee, 2006: 14-27). In addition to this, U.S. immigration policies that permitted the reunification of families allowed some Pacific Islanders to take advantage of this (Small, 2011: 52). They brought with them their families, belongings, and, most importantly, their culture. Because of this, Oceanic communities have established themselves throughout Aotearoa/New Zealand, Australia, and the United States.

### *Tongan Migration*

For Tonga specifically, small numbers of Tongans, primarily members of the royal family and higher-ranking nobility travelled to Aotearoa/New Zealand and Australia for educational opportunities during the late 19<sup>th</sup>-century (Lee, 2006: 6-8). Following the example of the Tongan upper classes, the commoner class of Tongan society began to migrate more so in the 1960s. This aligns the greater Oceanic migration with the need for unskilled labor and relaxing of strict immigration policies made the countries of the Pacific Rim more accessible.

The movements and experiences of the Tongan people across Oceania are well documented. For example, Cathy Small's *Voyages: From Tongan Villages to American Suburbs* depicts the decisions of one Tongan family in Tonga and how they are affected by personal, familial, cultural and global influences (2011). From Small's work, we see how interwoven global influences play within the inner workings of a village in Tonga and how Tongans define themselves and their motivations for migration. Living alongside one Tongan family as they contemplate the move from the islands to the United States, Small illustrates the threading of

personal, familial, cultural, and societal values. It is within these contexts the impact of anga fakatonga and Tongan familism become more visible.

The debate to move is not a solitary decision as the family chooses to send over one daughter to establish herself financially in order to remit money to help support the family (ibid). This is not an isolated case: remittance is a common practice among Tongan families with members abroad. In this way, Tongan families are able to maintain their livelihood in the islands while also being active in the global community. Most importantly, this is an act of faka'apa'apa and exemplary of anga fakatonga (Morton, 1996). However, the practice of remittance is not the only reason for migration.

It is common for Tongan households to have members in Tonga and abroad. This actually eases the stress of migration for other family members as they decide whether or not they will move themselves (Small, 2011). It also acknowledges increased accessibility of migration due to the immigration policies of other countries (Morton, 2006). This demonstrates the surfacing of modernity within Tonga that Besnier discusses (2011). The presence of family members abroad and at home globalize the Tongan family in a manner that localizes the global and globalizes the local. In this way, the migration appears more accessible for many Tongans. Although there are many factors that can dictate this accessibility, nevertheless, it also does not encompass all the reasons for Tongan migration (Francis, 2009).

Small writes that Tongans “perceive themselves and their culture in a global perspective” (2011: 201). Rather than individualize themselves amongst global communities, Tongans view themselves as another working part of the global system. This is reflective of an earlier socialization of knowing one's place within society (Lee, 2006). An important marker of the Tongan mentality towards migration is not that it is an escape from an oppressive government



nor an absolute survival scenario, but to be better Tongans (Small, 2011). This relates to the desire for “chieflihood” as explained earlier (Morton, 2006). Steeped within anga fakatonga, is to “aspire to chieflihood” and migrating overseas in order to support one’s family overlaps both of these Tongan cultural values for many Tongans. Thus, Tongans positively view migration because it embodies such a deep cultural significance to them.

In summary, Tongan migration is born out of a slew of entanglements that are both inherent to the culture of Tonga and introduced with the increased migration of Tongans. For some, migration is a means of taking advantage of the accessibility of the global and bringing it into the local context. This is mainly done through remittance networks as transnational families exchange money and other goods. For others, it is a sense of fulfilling Tongan cultural values produced from anga fakatonga. To become “a better Tongan” is the primary example of this. Essentially, being a “better” Tongan aligns Tongan senses of familial obligation with the socioeconomic bonuses that migration provides. Both are important in understanding Tongan diasporic communities that establish themselves outside the homeland.

### *Tongan Diasporic Communities*

I use diaspora as a term to describe the multiple migrant communities of Tongans outside of Tonga because they are “diasporic” in the sense of being multiple communities of a dispersed population” (Morton, 2006: 6; Clifford, 1994). From Aotearoa/New Zealand to the United States, Tongans have established communities all their own. Some of these communities are built on many shared Tongan values, most especially anga fakatonga (Morton, 2006). The creation of Tongan space in a foreign place is essential for Tongan culture to survive in the diaspora. When the default culture is not their own, Tongans create their own space for their culture to thrive.

This is seen in the performances of Tongan dances at the Pasifika Festival in the southern suburbs of Auckland, to the Tongan church services of the San Francisco Bay Area. But, while Tongans are creating their own space, their host communities have a major influence on this as well.

Although the influence of host nations, such as Aotearoa/New Zealand, Australia, and the United States, impact all of their resident Tongans, it is those that are born and raised there that feel the host nation's influence the most (ibid). The first generation of immigrant families face many issues including assimilation and acculturation upon first move and settlement (ibid). However, it is the following generations of those immigrant families that deal with being raised between two differing spheres of influence. Once again, this is not to say that either issues outweigh the other, but it is to point out the complexities that each generation faces.

This diaspora-born generation of Tongans face issues regarding ethnic and cultural identity among others. Helen Morton Lee's work with overseas Tongans in Australia makes this a prominent point (2006). The discrepancies between Tongan and Australian value systems cause for dissonance for the younger generations of Tongans that is debilitating for some. The rigors of Australian individualism versus Tongan familism weigh heavily on members of the younger generation (ibid). Tongans who are born in the diaspora face questions of cultural identity as if they are raised *anga fakatonga* as it is marked in Tonga. This is in direct contrast to *anga fiepalangi*, or Western ways (Morton, 1996). Morton Lee's work only encompasses Tongans in Australian society, but it reverberates across Oceania.

Similar to the challenges diasporic Tongans face in Australia, April Henderson notes similar struggles for a new generation of Samoans in diaspora. Henderson's work on the Samoan diaspora indicates Tongans are not the only Oceanians facing these issues. From Los Angeles to

Apia, Henderson notes that hip-hop is how Samoan youth are able to navigate their complex and changing identities as Samoans abroad and at home. They accomplish this as they relate to the themes of resistance and racial pride persistent in American black hip-hop, while also creating their own style of Samoan hip-hop that more readily adapts fa'a Samoa, the Samoan way of life, and the Samoan identity (Henderson, 1999). In this way, the spread of hip-hop across the Samoan diaspora has facilitated a new Samoan identity in diasporic locales. This is a crucial work in its examination of how Oceanic people appropriate different practices for means of cultural survival and success in lands outside the homeland. Following Henderson's example, I look to see how Tongan communities are adapting anga fakatonga and Tongan identity to new spaces.

### *Sport In The Tongan Diaspora*

The dissonance between cultural influences and the need to create Tongan space is what brings sport to the forefront of this conversation. I choose sport as a point of interest in the Tongan diaspora because it overlaps and intersects with a variety of issues of importance for the younger generation of diasporic Tongans and the greater diasporic community. Among these issues are race, cultural identity, and pathways to success; this work seeks to understand how Tongans use sport to "become better Tongans". In a similar context as Henderson's work with hip-hop and the Samoan diaspora, sport is seen as an institution that has enabled Tongans to navigate the complex issues that arise in the diaspora.

While it is not true that Tongans turn solely to sport as a space to create or preserve Tongan culture or identity, I focus on sport because of its interaction with many different facets and issues of Oceanic and global society. Sport has come to prominence over the past few

decades in the Pacific and has evolved into an even more evocative institution in global society, especially in the places of Tongan diasporic communities. Today, athletes such as Serena Williams, Lionel Messi and Stephen Curry are as recognizable as world political leaders such as Ban Ki-moon, Angela Merkel and Barack Obama. The status of sport is steadily rising with its increasing professionalization, commercialization, and marketability. Still, the celebrity and its impact on popular culture is not the essential reason I use sport as my main medium. Throughout its history and in its present state, sport has maintained a window into the current status of its local, national, and global society. Whether it be racial tensions as seen at the 1968 Olympics, political protests seen during the Aotearoa/New Zealand All Blacks tour of then-Apartheid South Africa, or, the recent protest of the University of Missouri football players, sport is an intersection of many societal issues.

In the Pacific context, sport plays a major role in the nations of the Pacific. Sport has existed in Oceania for a long time, as many Oceanic sports, such as surfing, remain popular today. But, for the sake of contemporary Western sport, it was introduced by European settlers of the Pacific following European exploration of the Pacific as means of “civilizing the natives.” The Western-organized sports found their place within island society and have persisted today throughout the Pacific. Some, such as cricket and rugby, have taken on a more Oceanic flavor following their adoption by indigenous communities.

Today, sport is more commonly associated with its professional ranks throughout the Pacific. Whether it is the National Football League of the United States or Super Rugby of the Southern Hemisphere and Japan, professional sport is a dominant discourse in the general institution of sport. This has provided an end goal for many potential athletes to achieve and what many athletes and fans alike commonly refer to when they speak of “making it.” In

combination with its growing commercialization and marketability, professional sport has created an image of success and a desirable outcome for itself. The success and increased global visibility of Pacific Islander athletes such as Jonah Lomu, Troy Polamalu and Marcus Mariota have rendered some truth to this. Hence, it has established sport as a visible and viable pathway to success for Pacific Islanders.

I also note that it is imperative to remember that sport does not only involve the athletes, but also those who work to make the event possible. These are the officials, coaches, equipment managers, security guards, ushers, athletic trainers, and food service people that are active participants in sport that are not often discussed. Despite the lack of the attention paid to them, they are very much as involved in sport as the athletes that are front and center of attention. Those who consume sport are also significant. The fans and followers of sport provide the capitalist system of professional sport its foundation. Whether it is from watching games or purchasing clothing that supports their favorite athletes or teams, fans are consumers that fuel the professional sporting organizations.

### *Sports Focus*

Clearly, sport is a wide and diverse topic. Thus, choosing it as my medium to explore another wide and diverse topic in Tongan diasporic experience is daunting. Ultimately, I ask how has being a “better” Tongan shaped the Tongan diasporic experience through sport?

Because of this large, complicated question, I choose to narrow my research focus to answering two major questions regarding sport and the Tongan diasporic experience:

- How have Tongans used sport to be “better” Tongans?
- How has the pursuit of being a “better” Tongan affected diasporic Tongans?

Through these questions I answer how being a “better” Tongan has shaped the Tongan diasporic experience through the lens of sport. I explain how being a “better” Tongan has affected diasporic Tongans in two ways. First, I explain this through their own identification of their cultural identity and performance of that cultural identity. Secondly, I examine the issue of race and racialization among Tongan diasporic athletes and how being a “better” Tongan has problematized the Tongan body. Finally, I resolve how Tongans use sport to be “better” Tongans through sport as a means of social mobility in a variety of ways. In this manner, I explain how the ideology of being a “better” Tongan has shaped the Tongan diasporic experience, for better or worse.

### *Personal Purpose*

Before sharing my research, I would like to impart my primary reason for this project. Only one generation removed from the islands, my family has achieved much success by American standards, in our mass completion of degrees in higher education for some and a professional athletic career for others. While this may lead one to believe that I am inclined to see sport as a favorable aspect for Tongan diasporic life, they would be wrong. In spite of the apparent success of my family due to sport, I remain wary of the trappings of depending on sport as a vehicle of social mobility.

Personally, while I have been able to succeed in getting into higher education on my academic merits alone, I feel that it is simply not enough. Being good at school is one thing, but being good at sports is on a whole different plane. In my mind, my academic accomplishments have been somewhat of an “invisible success” compared to the athletic feats achieved by my family members due to the high visibility of athletics. Whereas familial support can be seen and

heard at sporting events, the same can only really be said in the academic realm at graduation, or the finish line. As an academic, I don't receive the same outward and vocal support on a weekly basis from my family, or thousands of other fans for that matter, as I would if I was an athlete. This is what pushes me to explore how sport has shaped the Tongan diasporic experience.

There is an "invisible pressure" for young Tongans to involve themselves in sport because it is the most "visible" means of success for them. Aside from the pervasive images of professional sports in the United States, sport permits those who aren't directly involved in a competition to still be involved merely through spectatorship. I believe the visibility of support is what makes sport so highly appealing to young Tongans, not to mention what seems like an overrepresentation of Tongans in professional sports and overt displays of masculinity in sport in general. In this way, sport has been thrust into the Tongan diasporic experience. Because of this, sport has unnecessarily become a primary desired vehicle for success for Tongans.

With this mindset, I set out to challenge my current understandings. I recognize how I have benefitted from sport, but also how I feel I have been constrained by it. I truly feel that sport has pigeonholed diasporic Tongans into falsely believing it is the best and most practical way to achieve success. Changing this perception is why I embark on this journey to complete this work and share my own findings.

### *Significance*

Having stated my personal purpose for this work, I also feel my work makes a significant contribution to the field of Pacific Island Studies. Much like the experiences it intends to shed light on, my work contributes to various aspects of Pacific Island Studies. It covers some of the struggles of identity found amongst the second-generation of Pacific Islanders in diasporic

communities (Morton, 2006). In addition to this, it explores issues within Pacific diasporic communities such as racial stereotyping and social mobility (Grainger, 2009; Hokowhitu, 2003). The diasporic issues reflect the mounting issues within the homeland. In the case of Tonga, it reveals the burgeoning clash of tradition and modernity seen in the changing expectations for gender roles and public health awareness (Besnier, 2011). In true Oceanic and Hauofian fashion, this work contributes in a number of diverse ways that touch upon Oceanic issues in both intentional and unintentional ways. I cannot truly describe the full impact of such a work because of this and know it only scratches the surface of its total significance to the field of Pacific Island Studies.

### *Research and Methods*

I have conducted my research through a series of interviews with Tongans from diasporic communities in Hawai'i and the United States. These interviews were conducted in-person in Hawai'i. All interviewees are of Tongan ancestry and self-identify, to some extent, as Tongan. The twelve participants all voluntarily agreed to be interviewed under the condition of anonymity and I choose to honor that out of respect for their privacy and personal thoughts and opinions. While some participants required multiple interviews, all were conducted in similar one-on-one conversational procedures. Although I had a predetermined set of questions, all interviews unfolded naturally and without much needed structure.

Interviewees were selected via convenience and snowball methods. I interviewed both athletes and non-athletes with varying sporting experiences. The purpose of this was to measure how deeply sport truly has impacted the Tongan diasporic experience. With athletes, I loosely define athletes as those who have competed at the collegiate or professional level in some



capacity, it is a given that sport has shaped their diasporic experience in some way. However, when contrasted against non-athletes (those who have not played sports beyond a high school or recreational level), I hoped to observe some variance in the Tongan diasporic experience, but also witness the different levels in which sport has affected such experience.

All interviewees were between the ages of 18-30. Of the twelve participants, five were male and seven were female and each had attained a university-level education in some capacity at the time of interview. The intention for limiting this work to a smaller number of participants is to keep it personal and intimate. Expanding the project beyond this desired amount would bloat the work in an unwieldy way for temporal reasons. This is the same reason for limiting the age range of the participants as I expected there not be too extreme a divergence in experience for an 18-30 age group as there would be for a group with no age range. It was also done with the intention of focusing on the experience of a new generation of diasporic Tongans that have yet to receive much research focus. I also maintain the compact size of the project in order to potentially expand on it at a later point in time as a future project.

While I recognize that the Tongan diasporic experience is largely diverse and spans many different countries and communities, I focus on Tongans raised in Hawai'i and California for being largely diverse and expansive in their own rights. As Helen Morton claims, Tongans prefer the United States to Australia and Aotearoa/New Zealand, seeing the U.S. as "higher up" than its counterparts in the Southern Hemisphere (Lee, 2006: 23). This reflects Tongans adherence to a hierarchical social structure, but also familial ties and the impact of Western ideology in the Pacific (ibid). I also chose Hawai'i and California because they maintain two of the highest populations of Tongans in the United States and have long histories of diasporic Tongan

communities with large Tongan communities on the North Shore of O’ahu, Maui and Hawai’i in Hawai’i and the San Francisco Bay Area and greater Los Angeles area in California (ibid).

### *Limitations*

While I make my best effort to give the most comprehensive analysis of the personal accounts presented here, I recognize that there are still limitations to my research that persist. For example, the small sample of participants allows me to explore their experiences in depth, but it also will not cover the variety of diasporic Tongan experiences and voices that we know exist (See Morton, 2003).

The same can also be said for the fact that all my interviewees were raised in Hawai’i or the United States. The absence of the diasporic Tongan experience in Aotearoa and Australia, among many other locations and communities, demonstrates that this work is only a small scope of the greater picture of the diasporic Tongan experience.

It should also be noted that my personal background might have also limited my own research. I echo Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s struggles of insider-outsider research within their own communities (2012). In this sense, I feel both the strengths and weaknesses of being an “insider,” being of Tongan descent and knowledgeable of most traditions and customs, while also being an “outsider,” growing up outside of Tonga and unable to speak fluent Tongan. This has clear implications on the research I have compiled.

As some of my participants are public figures within their communities, social desirability may have played a role with some of my participants’ approach to the interview process (Creswell, 2013). In spite of this, the anonymity of the informants and candid nature of

most their accounts would remove any doubts regarding social desirability playing a major factor.

### *Overview*

In the following chapters, I seek to understand how being a “better” Tongan has affected the Tongan diasporic experience through sport. The first issue to be explored will be cultural identity. In this chapter, I explore how the ideology of being a “better” Tongan has impacted diasporic Tongans through sport. I demonstrate how sport serves as a point of bonding for Tongan and Pacific Islander communities. I reveal how *anga fakatonga* conflicts with Tongan female participation in sport and how traditional Tongan gender roles constrain young diasporic Tongan women. I close this section with Tongan informants reflections on performing the haka, a traditional Māori war dance. This performance of identity evidences how the Tongan identity is subsumed by a greater pan-Pacific Islander identity for some diasporic Tongans.

The next chapter I turn my focus to another manner in which diasporic Tongans are affected by the ideology of being “better” Tongans: through race and the racialization of Tongan athletes. Through personal accounts, we see how colonial images and stereotypes persist in the diaspora and affect the formation of Tongan identity as “physical beings” (Hokowhitu, 2003). In addition to this, we see how the intersection of sport and race can provide social access for Tongan males, which segues into the subsequent chapter.

I look at how Tongans use sport to achieve their goals of being “better” Tongans, both consciously and unconsciously. This is primarily seen through sport being a pathway to success. Defined in varying ways by different interviewees, success serves as an end goal for many diasporic Tongans participating in sport. For some, it is to fulfill their familial obligation. For

others, it is to achieve an education that would make their family proud. This is the most visceral reasoning, but it also promotes the problematic idea of sport as vehicle of success for Tongans.

I conclude with my final findings on how this “being a better Tongan” ideology has shaped the Tongan diasporic experience. I then posit my own inquiries and thoughts for future research regarding sport and Pacific Islander migrant communities before closing.

This work was a dramatic undertaking for myself and there is no doubt within my mind that it will always be incomplete given the nature of it. In spite of this, I have completed this in the hopes that it will help others either in their own research ventures involving Tongan and Pacific Islander communities or understand their own self more than they did before.

## **CHAPTER 2: CULTURAL IDENTITY**

The issues of identity and identity formation among diasporic immigrant communities are a commonly navigated territory. Comprehensively covered by numerous scholars, it has yielded a vast range of results. To say sport has a permanent impact on identity formation is to make a huge assumption about humanity itself in limiting its ability to change adapt to different life events and experiences. However, to say sport has no impact on Tongan cultural identity formation would also be completely incorrect. As we see in each interviewee's account, their exposure to sport may vary, but it still maintains a steady presence in each of their experiences. Through these accounts we also see how central the idea of "being a better Tongan" is to many different diasporic Tongans. In this way, we see how cultural identity is empowered by sport and accomplishes diasporic Tongan ideals of being "better" Tongans.

For some, sport creates a space for gathering and connection with their Tongan community. This aligns with the Tongan value of tauhi vā, or maintaining social relations. The stands during an athletic event are abuzz with idle chatter and gossip during the pregame, timeouts, halftime, and post-game, allowing for social interaction. Although some interactions may not be the most courteous between opposing fans, these conversations form or reinforce social bonds among its participants. These social bonds serve as a means to reinforce "being Tongan" for fans, or "sideline participants," in sport, which we will see in Seini's account growing up on the North Shore of O'ahu.

Sport also serves as a place for resilience against cultural expectations. This is most prominently seen in Tongan female participation in sport. As a newer development in Tonga, women playing in organized groups outside of the male presence can be seen as countercultural (Morris, 2009). Tongan female participation in sport serves as a subversion of the normal

cultural role of Tongan women as primary caretakers of their families and viewed as the most selfless agents in Tongan society. Although the subversion of normative Tongan gender roles appears to run contrary to the idea of “being a better Tongan,” in actuality, the conflict strengthens such beliefs. The drive to establish a new Tongan identity proves an embracing of “Tonganness” rather than a rejection of it as will be discussed through the experiences of Losa and Eseta.

Finally, sport has served as a place for cultural expression. The most prevalent example of this is the haka. Identity is as much an external display as it is an internal realization (Hereniko, 1999). For this matter, how one chooses to represent their culture through such performance is extremely significant. While not specifically a Tongan cultural dance, the haka is a performance of a cultural identity for some, like Vake and Pila, and nothing more than a “football tradition” for others, like Loa.

All these facets of sport and identity are explored through these respective accounts of diasporic Tongans in the following chapter. First, I explain the issue of cultural identity in the diaspora and how it has come to its forefront. Building on this, I investigate sport as a space of connection for community through Seini’s life on the North Shore of O’ahu. This is followed by Losa and Eseta’s accounts and their resilience against normative Tongan gender roles through sport. I further explore the issue of cultural identity and performance through the performance of the haka by Tongan athletes as a pregame ritual across the diaspora. I pair this with responses from Vake, Pila, and Loa, diasporic Tongan athletes who have participated in such performances. Through these methods, I demonstrate how Tongan cultural identity is reinforced by sport and serves as a means in which to “become a better Tongan.”

## *Tongan Cultural Identity*

To understand Tongan cultural identity, I use Helen Morton Lee's definition of cultural identity:

Cultural identity encompasses the nonethnic, intragroup distinctions Tongans use, such as those between the bush and town people, different religious denominations, and so forth. Rather than attempting to conflate culture and ethnicity, the term 'cultural identity' as I use it refers to Tongans' own understandings of what it is to be Tongan and how they evaluate one another according to these understandings... Tongans are also adopting an ethnic identity, which is gradually blurring with what I have called cultural identity. In the host nations, this occurs as a response to the ideology and practices of 'multiculturalism,' in which ethnicity is represented in the public sphere primarily by the outward markers of cultural difference, such as food, music, and dance, clothing, and so on. (Morton Lee, 2006: 5)

Essentially, Tongans cultural identity is steeped in their own perception of anga fakatonga. This leaves for a very broad definition of cultural identity. However, as Morton Lee describes, the "blurring" of cultural and ethnic identity, we can see how this differentiates Tongans in different diasporic communities. The impact of the diasporic community plays a tremendous role in the shaping of cultural identity and this is emphasized by sport. Seini, the first account to be shared, illustrates the relationship between sport and the diasporic community and its reinforcement of cultural identity.

### *Seini*

Seini was born and raised on the North Shore of O'ahu, Hawai'i. A predominantly Pacific Islander community, the North Shore features a Tongan community that is very religious and encapsulates a small town mentality among its communities. "There's Samoans, Hawaiians, Māoris, Tahitians, a lot of different mix... a lot of Polys. Its funny because everyone says it the Pride of the North Shore... because of all the different groups," she states. Its strong sense of

community is evident, especially amongst the Pacific Islanders. This is a major factor in creating such a strong Tongan and Pacific Islander identity for Seini and many of the youth of her community.

For Seini, sport provided a space for her community to gather. The local high school football games served as the popular meeting grounds to catch up with friends or have a family outing. “Football games, that’s where everyone met up. That’s where the whole community met up.” The football games bonded her pre-dominantly Pacific Islander community as they united over cheering for their home team. While the community was small, they were robust in their pride for their local football team that comprised mostly of Pacific Islanders. “I think that’s what really stands out about my community, like no matter, I guess, where we’re at in the game or what happens, or whatever outcome, you see people, like their pride is crazy. They have 60- 70-year olds sitting at the game in the rain. Just wanting to watch. Oh man, it’s cool yeah.”

While Seini left volleyball at the beginning of high school, she maintained a connection to sport because it was so central to her community. While she does wish she had continued her own playing career, she was content with helping her parents take care of her younger siblings as their eldest child. “I stopped because I was like ‘I don’t think I’ll be able to last. Not like, my sister, who stuck it out. But, me being the oldest, I was like I gotta look out for these younger ones. I just can’t be focusing on sports and stuff. I should just focus on the classroom and then look out for them, and whatever they need for sports.’”

It was important for herself to be a role model for her siblings and focus on her academic side of school. “It was hard because I loved the game. I loved playing volleyball... It took a lot more because my parents, we’re all struggling, so I felt like more of the money should be going for them, make use of it. It wasn’t bad, but I was hurt. I’m gonna miss playing the game.”



Seini is extremely proud of all her siblings, especially her brother who has excelled on the football field. “I don’t even play on the field, but I’m always there for my brothers, and even all his friends they’re my little brothers.” When asked whether she takes more pride in her own playing days or her brother’s, Seini responded, “I think I take more pride in my brother. Because when I stopped, I was like OK I’m going to focus on school. Just to see him continue going in sports. [He’s] one of the few Tongans on the team, so me seeing him on the team, I’m always so proud of him.” She relates to one particular memory at an important game:

When he was played in the States [Championship], not even like a few minutes into the game, there was a penalty and I looked and I was like ‘Oh my gosh, that’s my brother!’... Then I looked, because he’s a linemen, so the guy he went up against was Tongan and he had like so much anger. He was going at my brother, so my brother, the way he tackled him was just, like crazy. Everyone said, ‘Ay, he’s Tongan. It’s the Tongan horse right there!’ And, just like me hearing that, I’m so proud of you. I don’t care what the penalty is. But yeah, I take more pride in my brother. Even when I stress out about my school things, I’m helping him with whatever he does beyond the classroom, we’re gonna be there for you no matter what, whatever school, whatever the future.

Seini admits that it is common for Tongans to be associated with sport in her area as “the boys play football and the girls play volleyball.” The Tongan boys are marked in her area as potential athletes and the area has seen its share of NFL players. “A lot of athletes are Tongan in [her town]... Because [her town] is known for football, the sports. That’s like the sports arena, so like, that’s why I feel like majority are known. Like a lot of Tongans play, especially football, that’s the thing. They make a name for themselves through that. Through the sports.”

### *Formation: Community in Sport*

While Seini personally did not directly participate in sport, the effect of sport on her community is readily apparent. It served as a major gathering point for the community to rally

about a shared cause. Seini's community serves as a Tongan cultural preserve because of its size and intimacy. Sport plays a role in strengthening these communal bonds across different social issues as they share a cause in their pride in their local football team. Because of this, it incubates a strong sense of Tongan identity for the diasporic Tongans in the area.

It is important to note that it is predominantly male sport that takes on such a role as Seini only references the sport of football, a male-dominated sport within Hawai'i and the United States. Football also serves as the major pathway of recognition and pride for Tongans in the North Shore as it is a proven example for their community.

The assembly of community because of culture and sport is similar to American football tournaments held by Hmong Americans for the Hmong community (Vang, 2016). In this manner, sport affirms the identities and communities that it brings together.

It is also important to note Seini's own pride in her siblings' sporting accomplishments over own. She demonstrates her role as eldest daughter by putting her family first and assisting her parents in raising her siblings. The influence of Tongan familism is present in how she wants the best for her family over her own personal gains. While this is the case for Seini, it is not an agreed upon role for all Tongan women. In the following account, Losa and Eseta depict a clash between the traditional gender roles for Tongan women in the diaspora and how sport reveals this conflict of cultural identity.

### *Losa*

Born to Tongan parents in the San Francisco Bay Area, Losa was raised by her grandparents. While she and her siblings were raised in different households, they were still raised as siblings as is common custom in Tongan culture. There were some differences in their

upbringing, mainly in Losa's case. Losa's grandparents raised her in what she considers 'anga fakatonga. Although she was born in the United States, Tongan was Losa's first language. It was important that Losa knew she was Tongan, according to her grandfather. "We are not white, we are Tongan. We are not American, we are Tongan," he would say.

At her high school, there were a few Tongans in her freshmen class. "My freshman and sophomore year, there was a lot of Tongans, a lot of Polys, but then by my junior year they had all gone to [continuation school]. So, there was only a few of us that made it junior, senior year." This was because they were moved to the local continuation school for poor academic performance. Losa felt that there were other contributing reasons as well. "A lot of family pressure...They have to work a lot or they get distracted. They think that drinking and smoking is cool...especially in high school." When asked about what she meant by "family pressure," Losa responded, "Being Tongan is hard, I don't know how to explain the pressure you're getting from your parents."

Losa noticed that the Tongans that remained and graduated alongside her were all athletes. "We liked playing sports. The ones that didn't go to continuation school, like they were in sports, they were in something that motivated them stay in school or that motivated them to do better in school so that they could stay in school. Therefore, like staying in high school and not going to [continuation school]."

The boys were primarily football players and the girls were either volleyball or basketball players. Sport kept them in school and from "doing nothing." Losa explains:

I think for the other Tongans, or other Polynesians, they were kinda struggling in school, but the only reason why they were trying was because they were in a team. Someone set a bar for them, like in order for them to get over it, they have to like go to class, do homework, stuff like that. Plus, it was something that they enjoyed. Most of them, they don't, like my friends, just the ones that I've seen,

they don't like school. So, then, because they have something they enjoy, then it kinda sets a bar for them. Therefore, they try hard in school.

This is because if you did not perform well enough academically, you could not participate in after-school activities. This incentive was enough to keep Losa and other Tongan athletes focusing in class and performing well academically.

Losa played basketball throughout high school against her grandparents' wishes. "It was so hard for me to play sports... Because my grandparents, were like "No, come home, you're a girl, come home.' I would always come home with bruises and stuff and my grandma would freaking kill me. They'd be like 'Look! You're a boy, look at you!'"

Losa discusses why her grandparents were so opposed to her playing sports, "It wasn't ladylike. Especially with Tongans, it wasn't ladylike. I was getting all these bruises and stuff. The practices were all late at night too. You know a lot Tongan [elders] don't want their daughter to be out there late... You go to school, you come home."

In spite of their refusals, her mother would allow her to continue on. "My mom knew how it felt. That's why she let me play sports." Losa states, "a Tongan girl is supposed to stay home, clean the house, you know don't do anything, just stay with the parents, take care of them. When they grow up, take care of them too. With the guys, I feel like, they can do whatever they want. I don't know why, but I think it has to do with the Tongan values again. That's how it is." While Losa did this when she could, she still played basketball.

Losa explained that there was a difference in familial support for the boys who played sports and the girls. "People are more excited with Tongan boys than Tongan girls. Especially, with football." She adds that, "Tongan boys can go out and do whatever they want. Tongan girls there is a huge restriction... The girls are like a representation of their mom and that's why

they're so strict on them." When discussing herself and her female cousins playing sports versus their male counterparts, Losa recalls her grandparents' reaction. "My grandparents were like 'Tell them to stay home, it's more useful for them to stay home and clean the house, then go and play basketball' and stuff like that. Then, with the guys, it's ok. They can do whatever they want."

In this sense, Losa feels that the expectation of Tongan girls is difficult to uphold. "The expectation these Tongan people have for these girls is way off. Like, what the values put on Tongan girls, they're gonna blow up one way or another. They're gonna rebel, you know?" She goes on to discuss why the support for female Tongan athletes is not on par with their male counterparts. "You've never seen like a Tongan volleyball professional player, I think it's more having these Tongan boys in football, they could potentially go to the NFL. Really, with these Tongan girls, it's like once in a million, the ratio is way off for Tongan girls versus boys to get to a professional sport or stuff like that." Ultimately, Losa states, "I feel like Tongan girls, when they play sports, they're not taken seriously like the boys."

Attending university in Hawai'i, Losa saw differences between her Tongan friends in the Bay Area and in Hawai'i. In the view of Hawaiian Tongans, Californian Tongans were "Americanized, they don't know that much Tongan. They're not even that Tongan... They look at us, we're ghetto." However, the Hawaiian Tongans came across as "uncivilized... They're more country, small island small mind" in the eyes of Californian Tongans. In spite of this, the Hawaiian Tongans were more likely to speak Tongan, which was a comfort for Losa. "They give value to Tongans. They value Tongan culture more."

Having grown up in a strict Tongan household, Losa believes that "language makes you Tongan." In addition to this, there is belief that being raised in Tonga makes you "more Tongan"

than a Tongan who grows up in the diaspora. “The ones straight from Tonga think that they’re better than us, in terms of Tongan, because like they can understand and they know all the stuff.” Upbringing is huge marker of Tongan identity because it is often called upon when someone acts in fashion that is not “befitting of a Tongan.” Losa comments, “I feel like someone who’s Tongan, and the stuff they do... They’re gonna blame “Oh, that person’s not as Tongan... I think a lot of people use that, like especially, when people do things that are un-Tongan or they’re looked upon as, ‘Oh, they weren’t raised Tongan...’” However, Losa feels that some Tongans from the homeland do not understand the Tongan diasporic experience. “They think things are given to them... They expect everyone to give them everything. They don’t expect hard work... They don’t understand the struggle that Tongan-Americans go through.”

Ultimately, for Losa, sport was a tremendous stress reliever. On the court, she could alleviate some of built-up anxieties over the expectations her grandparents had of her as a Tongan girl:

[Sport] gave me a way to relieve me of all of my stress. It comes with a lot of pressure being Tongan. A lot of expectations, especially with Tongan girls, I feel sorry for Tongan girls. Like a lot of people say they would rather have boys than girls because the boys can do whatever. With the girls, you gotta home train them. Especially, because the girls represent their moms and their whole families especially with the way they were raised. I feel like sport really helped me with the stress.

As will be seen in Eseta’s account, these anxieties surrounding performing traditional gender roles are sentiments shared by other diasporic Tongan women.

### *Eseta*

Sport was never a major part of Eseta’s life. While she was born in the California, she grew up in Tonga and travelling back and forth between the two places for most of her life. “It

took leaving Tonga for me to think about what it means to be Tongan.” Attending school in both California and Tonga, she now lives in Hawai’i where she continues her education. Eseta calls Tonga her home and identifies as a Tongan woman with some hesitation of labeling herself as such because of the expectation that comes with such. “Growing up in Tonga, with my family, it was this is what you do, this is what you do.”

Eseta identifies the ideal Tongan woman, “The good Tongan girl: she listens to her parents, she is humble, she’s kind, she is loving, she shares. She’s Christian. She doesn’t go out late at night. She listens to her parents...[She doesn’t] do anything that won’t make the family happy or will make everybody talk about the family because everybody talks.”

Eseta does not subscribe to these beliefs of the ideal Tongan woman, but attributes these projections as that of Tongan cultural and societal values. These images are maintained by Tongan society because Tongans are good at policing what is and is not Tongan.

Although sport has not played a major role in her life, Eseta has made connections to it throughout her life. “My family never pushed me to sport... When I say I was at home, I was at home a lot... I went school, came home, did chores around the house, did whatever my family wanted me too, which wasn’t too much, it was all home stuff, go to the store whenever they needed me too.”

While attending college in Northern California, she would identify with some of the school’s football players because they were Tongan or of Pacific Island descent. The most significant role sport has played in her life is in her childhood memories of living with her grandmother. Her grandmother was an enthusiastic rugby fan and would often watch Aotearoa/New Zealand All Blacks’ matches at their home in Tonga, “I have good memories of Rugby World Cup matches being shown on TV in Tonga because they were always somewhere

else where we'd have to stay up or wake up at 3am in the morning. We'd camp out in the living room and I'd always wake up to my grandma scream 'Pass! Pasi the polo!'"

These were moments of bonding for Eseta and her grandmother and may have played a role in her own casual rugby fandom having attended the most recent Rugby World Cup in London.

Eseta does have some reservations about not participating in sport when was younger. "I wish I had played sports more... I think it's a good thing to keep your body in shape and make new friends. To do something outside of schoolwork." Ultimately, she is at peace with her past experiences. "We were fine being on the side, but now, I'm like 'Aw, I think should've joined in!'"

### *Regulators and Rebels*

Losa's experience both coincides and contradicts this strict Tongan upbringing. Being raised 'anga faka-Tonga in the United States, Losa understood herself to be Tongan even amongst those who considered themselves to be "more Tongan" than others. However, to contrast from Seini's community, sport served as an act of rebellion against the 'anga faka-Tonga in which she was raised. Sport provided a release from the rigid cultural expectations of being raised a Tongan girl. Although she did not appreciate the same familial support that her male cousins did when they played football, Losa never questioned that she was still Tongan.

When compared to Seini's experience, we see that Losa still maintained her own strong identity as a Tongan woman in spite of going against the expectations set out for her. Sport serves to subvert the ideal image of a Tongan woman. In this way, Tongans strengthen their own



identity while also creating a new one. I recognize that gender has a major impact in both narratives, but that will be explored at greater length in a latter chapter.

Eseta exemplifies the cultural expectations of Tongan women in her experience as she lists the many qualities the ideal Tongan woman possesses. The compliance to her family's needs is probably the most significant expectation of both women and men. While women are expected to serve in the home, this is challenged in the diaspora by the surrounding cultures of individualism. Although the majority of her life has been spent in Tonga, Eseta still finds that she does not fit the expectations laid out for her. She respects her parents, but hasn't always obeyed them. But, she works to make her family proud. In Eseta's case, she embodies only one of the three characteristics of the ideal Tongan woman, yet she still identifies as Tongan.

I compare this to Losa, who by all means fulfilled such qualities, yet still received flak for playing basketball. This can be easily attributed to differences in family values, but I feel it reaches further than that. As Losa points out, there is far more familial support for her male cousins in their athletic endeavors than their own. This distinction points to a cultural expectation of men as able to do physical labor that women are not expected to carry out. As these ideas carry over from the islands, the generational divide occurs as diasporic values battle those of the homeland. It is through sport that we see this manifest.

### *The Haka*

In the global community, the New Zealand All Blacks, the national rugby team, are famous for performing the haka as a pre-game ritual. The haka, a traditional Māori war dance, brings the Māori culture and tradition to the forefront of the global audience's attention. In the same fashion, many U.S. college football teams, with players of Tongan and other Pacific Island

descents, perform a similar haka. While this haka is not representative of the players' Tongan culture specifically, it demonstrates an interesting identity complex in the diaspora. This supports Lee's assertions that "young people can find their sense of identity clashing with context: they feel Tongan when they are with non-Tongans, but then do not feel Tongan when with other Tongans. They are left with a sense of not really belonging to either group and therefore uncertain about their own sense of self" (Lee, 139). However, I feel this may be too confining a view of Tongan identity within the scope of the diaspora.

Although athletes identify as Tongan or other Pacific Islander, they still perform a traditional haka that is not their own in the name of a more loosely defined pan-Polynesian identity. This begs the question as to why diasporic Tongans are choosing to perform another culture's tradition instead of their own? The Tongan National Rugby team has displayed their own fearsome Sipi Tau, a Tongan war dance not unlike the Māori haka, on the global stage as well, often going toe-to-toe with their Pacific brethren from Aotearoa. However, the Sipi Tau is not nearly as widely practiced by those Tongan athletes in the diaspora. This dissonance will be explored in respect to how Tongans perceive their own identities. With this, I ask what exactly Tongans believe they invoke when they perform a haka before a match? Is it the "warrior spirit" that so many Polynesian athletes refer to when they discuss their heritage? Or, has it become just a pre-game tradition? In this instance, I disagree with Lee's assertions on Tongan youth being "uncertain about their own sense of self." Rather than adopting a binary view of Tongan identity, I believe diasporic Tongans are creating a new identity within their new homelands and adapting to these surroundings accordingly. As Niko Besnier states in *On the Edge of the Global: Modern Anxieties in a Pacific Island Nation*, "Tongans have always been their own interpreters of what has been percolated from elsewhere, and the current generations are no exception" (xxi). While

there are many routes the exploration of cultural identity can take, it is through the haka and it cultural representation that I hope to better understand the how sport reinforces cultural identity in the Tongan diaspora.

### *Vake, Pila, and Loa*

Having all performed the haka for their respective football teams, Vake, Pila, and Loa share differing perspectives on their pregame traditions. All three are NCAA Division 1 athletes for their respective schools. All three are of Tongan descent, with Lion hailing from Hawai'i and Pila and Loa both raised in the San Francisco Bay Area. I develop their personal accounts further in upcoming chapters, but their experiences contribute immensely to this analysis of cultural identity and performance via the haka.

For Vake, performing the haka is a point of pride for him as both a Tongan and local Hawaiian. "The boys on the team, we take a lot of pride in it. Obviously, the dance itself is a Māori dance, but we think of it as being the only team in Polynesia, so we're representing all of Polynesia in our minds, taking from our cousins and representing our culture basically."

While not a Tongan dance, Vake acknowledges that the haka is still a powerful display of Polynesian culture that is significant for he and his Polynesian teammates, regardless of which islands they are from. "It should be a source of pride for anyone whose left their own home culture to come and take on ours because that's why they came here."

He feels the cultural impact of the haka would not be the same if his predominantly white high school had performed it despite having a few Pacific Islander team members. "All the Polynesians we were like 'Heck, no! We ain't doing that. We're the white school.' There's no connection." Vake continues, "it's a romanticized view of the haka that everyone has," which is

why he reasons many of his non-Pacific Islander teammates want to perform the haka. In spite of this, Vake felt non-Pacific Islanders could perform the haka with the correct cultural education of it, but he felt, in the particular situation of his high school.

In Vake's view, the most significant point of performing the haka is that it expresses their culture for audiences who may not have been exposed to it, especially as "the only football team in Polynesia." It is also important as a majority of his current teammates are of Pacific Islander descent, "It's a tip of our hat, shoutout to our own people. That understand the significance of it and that we took the time to learn it and appreciate it. It's saying we're not just playing for ourselves we're trying to represent a bigger community, I think that's what we're doing."

Pila agrees with Vake's perspective. He believes that performing the haka is a nod to his and his teammates Pacific Islander genealogy. "Just the haka itself, I think is cool, I didn't grow up doing it but it's just cool to hear stories of why the haka was even invented. I take pride in it because of bloodline. My ancestry... Me being Polynesian... I think it's just cool."

Although he and his teammates are not all of Māori descent, they were taught and given permission to perform their haka from a Māori teammate and his kūpuna. This is the most vital issue to Pila when performing the haka is that the performers are conscious of the history and culture that they are evoking when they perform it. "I think its important knowledge. People are aware of what the haka is, but I don't think they understand it... Now, that I know the background of it, it helps me when we do it to have more respect for it." As he plays at a university with a significant Pacific Islander presence, Pila acknowledges why the haka is of greater importance for his university than one elsewhere. "I think our audience can appreciate it more... The guys we have on our team understand it more... So it's kind of a cultural thing."

Loa does not share similar sentiments to either Vake or Pila when he performs the haka before matches. He admits it is part of the Pacific Islander genealogy, but he does not feel a personal connection to it. “I can’t relate to it all. I think I feel a lot like how the palangis feel. But, I think I feel a lot more entitlement to respect the culture because I know somewhere along the line, my tradition is part of this. But, I didn’t grow up doing the haka or anything. It is a lot more foreign to me than most people would expect.”

Loa does not recognize the haka as having any cultural significance for his university. “I think they do it because it’s a football tradition here, rather than a cultural tradition.” His football team’s performance of the haka is not one that should cause a personal relation to it beyond that of the football team itself. “We’re not representing our specific cultures when we do that haka. Polynesians aren’t representing Tonga or Samoa or Hawai’i... They’re not representing any other cultures at that point, except Hawai’i... We’re all representing one thing and that’s Hawai’i. I don’t think there’s a cultural relevance to our actual ethnicities in the haka then there is the representation for the team.”

Loa concedes that some of his teammates of Tongan and Pacific Islander descent may not feel the same way, but for him he had never previously performed it in any cultural context. “What people think it represents, is definitely how people perceive us. When we do the haka, we’re representing our team and Hawai’i. Other teams think they’re playing true Hawaiians.”

### *Cultural Performers or Cultural Erasures?*

There is a divided consciousness in the performance of the haka by some performers themselves. For Vake and Pila, it is a point of cultural pride in affirming their identity as Pacific Islanders. It is important to note the distinction between the Tongan identity expressed by Losa

and the Pacific Islander identity expressed here. While the Tongan identity is a point of pride for all these participants, they also find great pride in the subsuming Pacific Islander identity as well. This identity has far greater reach than the Tongan one and is far more collectivist in nature.

Loa's disconnect with the haka also represents how he views Tongans and Pacific Islanders through sport. For Loa, there is a distinction between performance and place. The context of his team's haka performance removes its cultural significance and makes it a "football tradition" more so than a cultural expression. The place in which they perform erases its cultural significance and robs the haka of its mana. Although he understands each of his teammates interprets this differently, for him it has little personal relation.

These two oppositional reactions demonstrate, much like in the instance of Seini and Losa, how sport provides a lens that simultaneously produces two disparate images. One of these is point of immense cultural pride and a demonstration of such. The other is one that laments an empty and misleading football tradition. The dichotomy is far too representative of the how many diasporic Tongans view their selves.

For some, public acts of cultural expression are a reaffirmation of their own cultural identities (Hereniko, 1999). This creates, forms and strengthens the cultural identity for some participants. For others, it is only a reminder of the lack of attachment they have to such an identity that they are supposed to maintain. This public cultural display reminds these people of their shortcomings and how they do not meet the expectations of their own culture.

### *Conclusion*

In the midst of the Tongan diaspora, lies the question of cultural identity. With different generations of Tongans being raised outside of Tonga, by generations of Tongans that were

raised in Tonga, a dissonance occurs. As cultural values from their birth country clash with that of their parents, Tongans are beginning to create a new cultural identity for themselves that sets them apart from their host communities and homeland communities. However, this dissonance is altered by sport.

The reinforcement of cultural values and customs in spaces that permit this are evidence of this. However, sport contradicts this by providing a space to rebel against said cultural values and spaces. In both of these factors, sport still can produce strong senses of Tongan identity. Sport provides a space for the expression of cultural identity through pre-game rituals like the haka, which is met by both positive and critical receptions. For some, it creates a Pacific Islander space in a white place. Others see it as whitening a Pacific Islander tradition. This dichotomy only furthers the discussion of cultural identity in the Tongan diaspora as it subsumes ideas of self, place, and practice.

Overall, we see how diasporic Tongans are affected by the ideology of being a “better” Tongan. Diasporic Tongans see themselves as Tongans because of their strong sense of community and adherence to Tongan cultural norms. However, they also see themselves as Tongan when they rebel against these same norms through sport. They identify as Tongan when they perform a traditional Māori war dance. Yet, they identify as Tongan when they disagree with how these performances are done. The complexities and contradictions of this cultural identity are inevitable for such a complex and diverse culture that can only be surmised as *anga fakatonga*. The Tongan culture differs depending on whom you ask and thus creates different identities that are all encompassed by being Tongan and constantly seeking to be a better one.

### **CHAPTER 3: RACE**

As sport has served as a vehicle for diasporic Tongans to become “better” Tongans, it has created other opportunities as well. Sport has been a space for Tongans to create their own identity in Australia, Aotearoa/New Zealand, the United State, and elsewhere. However, it has also added other implications with this performance of identity. Sport is a major intersection of many social issues and one of the most significant has been race. A social construct within the United States, as in many other Western nations, race plays a major role in Western societies. In the United States, it has served as a defining characteristic to separate and identify people based on supposedly shared physical or genetic traits (Spickard and Daniel, 2004).

For immigrant communities, race and racialization have marked their differences from the mainstream culture. Tongan communities in Hawai’i and the United States exemplify this. Across these diasporic communities, Tongans, grouped with other Polynesians, are labeled as physical athletes, especially young adult males (Besnier, 2014). This is present in the high participation of Tongan males in sport. Using the Tongan experience, I explain how majority societies racialize minority communities. In essence, the pursuit of becoming “better Tongans” has shaped how host communities view their Tongan counterparts and created racialized perspectives of diasporic Tongans that limit their perceived opportunities to professional athletic ventures.

I define racialize and the process of racialization in the vein of Paul Spickard in which it “delineates the different phenotypical embodiments into presumed exclusive groupings and imposes on them attributes and features according to the ideological and social values of the specific cultures within which racial categories are being defined. These categories, in turn, signify social conflicts and interests, which determine how a given society allocates wealth,



power, privilege, and prestige” (2004). Through this, I highlight the interplay between the host culture and its Tongan community.

### *The “Noble Savage” and Colonial Legacies*

Before continuing on to the diasporic experiences, I first look to how Tongans and Polynesian bodies have been racialized due to their colonial pasts. The colonial legacies of race are most apparent in tales of the “noble savage.” The romanticized image of Pacific Islanders as being closer to nature than their European counterparts appealed to the European explorers and minds that first encountered them in the Pacific (Grainger, 2009). This popular image promulgated across the West creating the paradisiacal Pacific imaginary that still persists today (Ibid).

While the “noble savage” is not the only significant image in the colonial legacy, it is important to remember within the view of Tongan athletes today as it promotes the “soft primitivism” that has been a staple of racial ideologies regarding Pacific Islanders, especially in congruence with Native Hawaiian people (Desmond, 1999). The racialization of Native Hawaiian men as “surfers” and “beachboys” is the best example of Pacific Islander bodies in the white American imaginary as it constitutes the most widely known Pacific Islander body in the United States (ibid). I compare this to Brendan Hokowhitu’s “physical education” of male Māori youth and the early racialization in education systems of Aotearoa/New Zealand. I cite these views of Pacific Islanders in conjunction with the symbol of the Polynesian body as it is used to represent the entirety of the Pacific (Teaiwa, 1999). It is within this framework that I discuss Tongan bodies.

## *Tongan Bodies*

As I discuss Tongan athletes, and Pacific Islander athletes in general, we also view discussions of the Pacific Islander bodies. In light to this, I examine the stance of Tongans as valuable bodies. Tom Mountjoy and Lisa Uperesa discuss Polynesian bodies as commodities and their movement from the homeland to elsewhere to play sports in their research. “Young athletes seek to benefit through potential opportunities, yet the fact remains that every wrong step and every missed tackle places them at risk of rapid devaluation” (Mountjoy and Uperesa, 272). Wrestling with whether or not Tongans are being treated as competent and capable human beings or tools for capitalist gains, Mountjoy and Uperesa call for more attention to the study of sport. “For transnational Pacific Islander communities especially, critically engaging the histories and presents of sporting practice (particularly those that are highly capitalized and commoditized) is imperative because they are shaping the future possibilities of current and coming generations” (Mountjoy and Uperesa, 273). This is an important conversation as it brings the colonial legacies of the Pacific into present realization and is the impetus for this work. These conversations lead to Vake’s experience in the Tongan diaspora. Vake helps cement many of these ideas of the racialization of Tongan athletes and their valued bodies throughout his own life and athletic career.

## *Vake*

Vake was raised on O’ahu, Hawai’i, in one of the more sparse Tongan communities on the island. “The kids I grew up with were from all different kinds, there were some Tongans but it wasn’t strictly Tongans...Samoans, Hawaiians, white kids, just like mixed.” Vake identifies

himself as “Tongan and a local kid pretty much. A local kid that is Tongan. As opposed to, I’m just Tongan.”

Attending an elite private, predominantly White and Asian high school, Vake felt the separation from his classmates immediately:

For one, we were all athletes...we found similarities with each other’s, our values, just things we were into...We were kind of pigeonholed by all the other white kids to be like, ‘Oh, you guys are all this way’...That affected how a lot of us behaved because all these other kids put pressure on us, like ‘Oh, you’re all the Poly kids so you’re supposed to play football, or you’re supposed to like reggae music or rap music’...That’s the social image of Polynesians is that they play football, so they all just assume we’re there to play football...[The Polynesian athletes] carry that kind of swagger with them because they’re supposed to be better and that’s how they’re assumed by other kids in the school. They even used to joke about it to me personally all the time. ‘Oh, you guys are the bangers!’ Because we’re the Poly kids, we’re the tough kids basically.

Vake saw this materialize in football as well with the influx of Polynesian athletes at his school:

I think it was almost done on purpose by the people kind of recruiting people to come to the school. I think they wanted the identity of the Polynesian players obviously. All the stereotypes going around, a lot of people believe the Polynesian players are superior... Physically, a lot more mature, especially in high school, when kids are young and growing. Polynesian kids are typically bigger, faster, stronger...physically mature.

These expectations came with Vake’s transition from public school to private school:

I didn’t originally go to a private school. When I was in public school there was plenty of other Polynesian kids and I didn’t even think. I just liked football. But then, as soon as I went to [private school], they started throwing this on me. It was funny because a big player at the school at the time was [Polynesian] and he was like the star linebacker. One of the first Polynesian kids to play at [private school] and I didn’t even play his position, but I somehow got ushered into playing that position, you know because, I don’t know, I guess racial profiling...

His football coaches held the Polynesian players to a higher standard in terms of physicality and not being pushed around by players of other ethnic backgrounds:

[The coaches would say] ‘C’mon, you’re Tongan, you’re supposed to squat like 400 pounds’ or something’ It’s like a joke, but they’re kind of serious. Serious or not, that’s the kind of environment they’ve created...A lot of us just enjoyed playing football and stuff. But, when a lot of us came to the school...we started feeling pressure from the community. We’re supposed to be the ones leading the team; we’re supposed to be the ones making the plays and stuff. I remember doing conditioning and just trying to survive. But after a couple of years at [private school], if I’m running and I see like, a white kid in front of me, I feel like ‘Oh, this isn’t right, I gotta step it up.’ As opposed to seeing one of my Samoan teammates running in front of me, I might think its ok.

The transition to playing American football collegiately has had Vake view his own standing as a Tongan and Polynesian athlete in a different light. “It’s not so much a racial pressure. For me, it’s a pride issue because this is my home and in front of my family now and with teammates that I knew in high school. It’s not so much racially motivated.” After originally attending and playing for a university in Utah, Vake returned to Hawai’i. “I felt a little bit out of place...Even the Polynesian kids that were up there, because there is a large group of Polynesians in Utah for sure, they weren’t the same as what I was used to over here. Sometimes I found it hard to see eye to eye with them...basically, just a culture shock for me.” In spite of returning to Hawai’i to continue his playing career, Vake still faces some pressures to perform:

I still think there’s a certain stigma that Polynesian players are supposed to play a certain way, like we’re supposed to be tougher than the other kids or something and they’re supposed to be faster than us...it’s at least in the back of your head those stereotypes...“The most pressure was with the way I should play...there’s this stigma with Polynesian running backs that they’re supposed to be really big and not as fast. Power backs that are supposed to run you over and block and stuff. Normally, that’s a little bit of, part of my game but I was never considered that kind of running back. But when I came here, I felt pressured, even by coaches to like pick up all this weight, which is not even how I normally play.

Ultimately, Vake closes in remarking at the role of sport in his life:

Sport is a whole lot to me...it’s been up there with the most important things in my life for almost my whole life now...the reason I put so much emphasis on it is because my parents have got me to get the idea that the way I play sports reflects upon my character. The way that I play the sport, if I play with integrity, do I play

hard, do I work hard, do I prepare for it is it a reflection on us as a family...Especially, now in college, because we actually have our last name on our back. That's the number one thing I hear my Dad talking about, 'whatever you do, never mess up the name on your back.' I remember when I was in high school, I had this one dumb play...it was a blatant personal foul. But, my Dad couldn't get over it and I had a good game that night too. He was telling me how disappointed he was because they called it out in the stadium. My last name, my grandpa's last name and he just kept telling me how disappointed my grandpa would be. That really hurt me to the soul.

Despite this one difficult memory, Vake continues to play with the hopes of making it to move forward with his academic and athletic career.

### *Pacific Islander Male Bodies*

The commodification of Polynesian bodies is applicable to Vake's experience because of the market for male bodies in professional sport (Besnier, 2014). While it is interesting to speculate whether the same could be applied for females, at the present moment these flows are still growing in comparison to their male counterparts and among different sports. For American football and the high visibility of Polynesian athletes, Polynesian males are of high potential value due to their perceived strengths and shared cultural values important to team sports (ibid). Through Vake's experience, we see early on the value placed on Polynesian male bodies and the benefit others see in using them.

The particular style in which Pacific Islander athletes are expected to play comes in this vein of physicality. The "island style" of play, as described by Andrew Grainger in regards to Pacific Islander men in professional rugby, carries over to Vake's experience in American football (Grainger, 2009). When coupled with the "physical education" of Pacific Islander males, as seen in the work of Brendan Hokowhitu, we can observe how the process of racialization continues throughout a Pacific Islander male's life (Hokowhitu, 2004). Vake grounds these racial

expectations in his reflections in the “environment they created” in reference to that of his high school coaches.

The “noble savage” imagery is magnified by Vake’s presence in a space unaccustomed to Pacific Islander bodies. He is racialized as a physical being that is “supposed” to be more athletic because Pacific Islanders are more “physically mature” than their Caucasian and Asian counterparts. It is these strands of commentary that are indicative of the experience for Pacific Islander males in the United States. While this does not cover the entire diversity of the Pacific Islander male experience, as we will see soon enough, it is nonetheless indicative that even in an espoused multicultural community such as Hawai’i there are still racialized ideologies that are formed and enacted. I explore this further in comparison to Sela’s experience in a sport that is unaccustomed to the presence of Pacific Islanders.

### *Sela*

Raised in Hawai’i of mixed-Tongan descent, Sela identifies herself as Tongan, “I personally consider myself Tongan. I don’t believe if I went to Tonga, if I go to visit my Tongan family in California, I don’t believe they would consider me Tongan just because I didn’t grow up the way they did, going to church every Sunday, y’know having all the gatherings...”

Because of this, Sela does not feel a very strong connection to being Tongan. “I feel disconnected from the Tongan side. I feel it’s too late to change...I feel like I’ve already grown up and I’ve learned most of my values.” In regards to potentially continuing Tongan traditions within her own family, Sela did not feel comfortable either. “It would be cultural appropriation. It would be wrong.” However, Sela does feel that Tongan culture has strong ties to sport. “Sports and Tongans go so well in hand because sports creates a community kinda thing like you’re all in

this together kinda thing and that goes in line with the Tongan community kinda thing.” It is also a major aspect of her family as “They always talk about rugby and football... Football is a huge part of the Tongan side of my family.”

A water polo player throughout high school, Sela relents that many of her Tongan and other Polynesian friends do not see water polo as a sport. “Some people tell me it’s not a sport... People are like, ‘It’s not a sport. You’re just swimming around.’” Many of her Polynesian friends leaned towards other sports:

A lot of my Tongan friends or like a lot of my Polynesian friends, I had maybe one in water polo, but most of the gravitated towards... paddling. They were super gung ho about paddling. I understand because it’s basically a Polynesian sport and it was used in the old days. They gravitated towards track, like shot put... I didn’t really have a lot of Polynesian friends in that aspect of my life, which I think is sad... I guess, I tried to encourage my Tongan friends to come out, you know ‘It’s fun!’ all that kind of stuff, but I guess, it was out of their comfort level. You know, you don’t hear a lot of Tongan, or Polynesian people, excelling in swimming or water polo. It’s like a huge different aspect.

Sela laughs that people are often surprised when she tells them she plays water polo because the normally assume her to be a volleyball player:

The volleyball aspect is huge, especially when you’re tall and your brown... they expect you to play volleyball or all these sports where your height matter. That’s like the first thing people ask me, ‘Oh, did you play volleyball in high school?’ and it’s funny because I’m not really good at volleyball... I understand because if you look at the women’s volleyball team, there are a lot of popular Polynesian volleyball players... They were so shocked to find out that I played water polo, all that kind of stuff. And, you never would think. I’m just a weird paradox, my last name is [not of Tongan origin] and I play water polo.

Sela comments that the competitive setting of sports has allowed for her to release some of her frustrations:

I’ve always been more aggressive in water polo and sports than, say, for example, my like Asian counterparts, or like, I guess, my white counterparts kinda thing. I don’t know if it’s stereotyping to say it’s like mostly Polynesians who are more aggressive in sports, but I did see a trend of that. Like some of the best and

strongest people would be like the Hawaiian girl from [another school] or, you know what I mean, like the Samoan girl on [another school] or something like that. And, I'm not saying it's better, but like that aggression, when it's channeled into something positive, like a sport, I feel like ultimately it's a better thing than like channeling aggression towards like their kids or anger towards something else and like I don't know if, this is super stereotypical, Polynesians have more anger, than other people. But, I feel like sports is a great way to channel that aggression...you just need an outlet.

Sela observed differences between those Polynesian students, and some of her friends that did not participate in sport. "My friends that didn't play sports, it's not that I looked down upon them, but I kinda did. I kinda did look down upon them because they would just have like o much free time and a lot of times they would use that free time for things that weren't productive...the ones that didn't play sports, I don't know what they did with their life."

Sela goes on to reflect on connections to the larger Tongan community in regards to participation in sport:

I feel like in the Polynesian community, in the Tongan community, there's two aspects of where your life could go, it could go either towards sports and like doing better at school and all this kind of stuff or it can not go towards sports and that you're gonna just fail at life kind of thing. That's one thing I don't like about the mindset. That's such a huge mindset, like if you don't do sports, you're not gonna do good in school, kind of like go to college, all this kind of stuff...They've been told sports is the only way to go, all that kind of stuff, like I feel like they're beat down kind of thing. I really don't like that... They say its either sports or not sports. They just push more towards sports or some type of activity, which is great. I would push my child to sports, or like dance, or something physical. But, I feel like that's such a great thing to do, but at the same time, I'd want them to focus on like mental things such as this...I don't want my child to be some meathead Tongan kid...I feel like I would want them to be more developed. I feel like the Tongan community forces the sport thing... I think [sport] is great, but I think we should also focus on other things.

Although she continued her athletic career into college, Sela decided it was best for her academic goals to retire from water polo because of the strain it placed on her daily schedule:

It was too much for me to keep up with school, because school was my number one priority kinda thing. I just couldn't keep up with grades, like at all. I was



barely scraping by with classes and I had to quit...because college level is different from the high school level, you stop playing for fun and stop playing for enjoyment. There is still that aspect but you start playing...the whole school's weight is on you because your showing all the other schools, how good your school is and in high school no one really cares, or they did, but it's only really high school. But, in college, so much is on perfecting your technique and all of this, so it wasn't really fun anymore.

In spite of her premature departure from the sport, Sela stands by her decision. "It's not something I regret, but it's something I've thought about. Ultimately, I feel I made the right decision because school will always be there."

While she acknowledged the racial stereotypes surrounding Tongans and other Polynesians in terms of physicality, Sela discusses how sport has allowed her to connect with the Tongan side of her family because "it is just part of the Tongan tradition. Like church and football...how football and church go hand in hand, like, I guess that's how they bonded too." As someone who identifies as Tongan, but was not affirmed as such by her family, sport provided that space of validation for Sela:

Throughout my whole life, like I've said I don't feel like I'm Tongan, I don't feel like a true Tongan, church all that kind of stuff, I don't have Tongan, not values, the Tongan mindset kind of thing. But, I think when I started playing...water polo, in high school especially, we kind of had a disconnect...when I started playing water polo, I actually started feeling apart of the family...I didn't feel Tongan until I started playing more sports...I didn't fulfill that part of the Tongan aspect, or tradition.

### *Pacific Islander Female Bodies*

Sela offers a plethora of significant contributions to the racialization of Tongan athletes. Despite the gender difference between her and her male counterparts, she demonstrates that the expectation of her to be a good athlete, and a particular athlete at that, affects Tongan women as much as it does men. This is a significant departure from what Jane Desmond describes as "hula

girls” (1999). In this sense, Sela embodies a far more physical being than what Desmond sees as the more romantic figure of European male desire. This is extremely important as it juxtaposes the delicate beauty that Pacific Islander women are supposed to represent.

In addition to this, she participates in a sport that is unexpected of most Tongans. This is partially due to her gender, as Tongan women are not traditionally expected to participate in sport, but also because water polo is not a sport that is predominantly white. This is what further racializes Sela apart from her predominantly white teammates. However, this also internalizes her own belief in her own Tongan identity that is complicated by her mixed ethnic identity. Because of this, Sela presents an intriguing intersection of race, gender, and class. This is not all too different from Vake and his presence at an elite private school.

### *Gendered Roles in Sport*

It is readily apparent in Vake’s experience amongst his non-Pacific Islander peers and coaches that colonial imaginaries of the “noble savage” are still apparent. The expectation of Pacific Islander male masculinity is also persistent in his narrative. These two themes provide a powerful overarching message the intersection of race, sport and the Tongan diaspora. That message being that Tongan males are upheld as strong bodies intended for physical labor.

While it is more so present in Vake’s experience, the “naturalized aggression” that Sela as a water polo player is reminiscent of the aspects respected by the “noble savage.” As she mentions this was a marker of the Pacific Islanders she competed against, it also denotes internalized beliefs of her community. Perhaps one of the more key elements, are the internalized beliefs that persist among diasporic Tongans. This is pointed out by the colonial legacies that

endure in areas steeped in settler colonial history such as Hawai'i (Desmond, 1999). In these places, Tongans are more susceptible to such ideas of racialization because of its history.

Between Vake and Sela, the most prominent aspects of their experiences are how they embody the idea of becoming a “better” Tongan differently. For Vake, we see how he seeks to fulfill the expectations put upon him to perform his Tongan identity for his coaches and teammates. This Tongan identity takes a different shape for his family as they pay close attention to his character and behavior that exemplify *anga fakatonga*. In the first respect, Vake's racialization as a valuable Polynesian body reinforce his Tongan identity, whereas, his cultural identity is reinforced by his family's gaze both on and off the field. This differs for Sela.

While Sela participates in a different sport, she uses it to fulfill the Tongan identity that she feels is absent outside of the athletic realm. Sela's racialization actually reinforces her cultural identity and connects her to her Tongan family that she feels are more ingrained in *anga fakatonga* than she is. In this way, she inverts Vake's racialization and use of sport.

Each of Vake and Sela provide interesting views on racialization and the performance of cultural identity. I recognize that both are of mixed ethnic descent and while both “pass” for Tongan, they identify as Tongan with some reservations. Regardless, we see the interplay of race, cultural identity, and sport. We see similar strands with Loa in regards to his racialization and ethnic identity.

### *Loa*

Loa was raised in a Tongan home in one of the more impoverished neighborhoods of the San Francisco Bay Area. Loa still sees his upbringing as in the way of *anga fakatonga*. He describes a Tongan upbringing as such:

Very strict. Very religious. If there were a top three things that make you Tongan, I think it would be a strict upbringing, a religious upbringing, and then...respect for family, knowing that you represent a certain family, the respect you have for your elders within your family, and then just like your style of living with respect towards your family, all of that...

However, Loa attended a wealthy, white private school in an adjacent, more affluent neighborhood. "I would go to [private school] and then come back to basically Tonga." This affected how he views his own identity. "I am a lot more like them, than I am my own culture...I am more palangi than I am Tongan at the end of the day."

Loa recounts that there were only three Tongans at the school when he began attending:

There were a handful [of minorities]. A lot of the reason why is because those kids came from three main public middle schools...the handful of minorities at the school were handpicked from [nearby areas]... Me and another Tongan] were recruited for athletic reasons. That very rarely happens at our school. Other private schools do it way more frequently than our school did, which is why I feel like they have a lot more color minorities there.

Loa's brother had also been recruited to attend the same private school, but adamantly refused. "[He] looked down on [the private school]. 'They're not going to accept us for who we are' kind of thing." After witnessing Loa's experience at the school, his brother's sentiments regarding the school changed, although he settled for the local public school. "He kind of respected what they were doing over there at [private school], just preparing people for real life. Because at the end of the day, real life is more like [private school] then it is my house. That's just the reality."

With a predominantly white student body, he was aware he stood out purely based on appearance. However, he felt it was easier for him to assimilate because he was both a male and an athlete:

At a private school, so many things come in to play. Whether you're a girl or a boy, whether you're an athlete, whether you're a dominant athlete at that. For a

girl, whether you're pretty or ugly... Luckily for me, I dodged a lot of that because I played sports and I was good. What I did notice was for the minority girls, it's like torture growing up...to see minority girls grow up in a private school system, where it was predominantly white, it sucked to see how much of a struggle it was for them because I was in a better position.

As a male, Loa was not under as much social expectation as his female classmates.

Especially for the non-white females, he felt there was more social pressure to conform to the white, female standards of behavior for the school:

For girls though, sports matter, but sports don't matter for girls at a private school from what I experienced. What does matter though, is how pretty you are. I watched some minority girls really stick it out and just really just stick to the fact that they are beautiful the way they are in their own skin kind of thing. It worked for some and it didn't for others...the rest of the minority girls thought being White was pretty. So, they did their best to be white.

This is compared to what he felt was less pressure for non-white males to conform to the white, male standards of behavior:

Sports for minorities at a private school made it a lot easier to be widely accepted having not known anyone at the school... In terms of being accepted by a body of people that I didn't know before, it was a lot more easier for them to want to be my friend than it was to be the other guy's friend who didn't play sports and didn't know anybody through sports and was just a minority kid that nobody knew. It was a lot easier for him to be left out in high school than it was for me because I was so relevant in all the other things.

For the non-white female students could either conform the norms of the school and get through or maintain their own sense of self and risk the social challenges of alienation. While sport protected him from much of the social challenges of being a non-white student, Loa felt that this was not the same for the non-white female student-athletes:

They hit this cultural brick wall. 'Hey, you're not gonna get any farther, you know this road is gonna be tremendously hard on you and all you have to do is be a little bit more like us.' Then, once they get more accepted for being a little bit more like palangis, they just start eating up more and more and more until eventually they're palangis.

Loa attributes this eventual demise to a lack of adaptability in culture. “In a private school setting, it’s inevitable...it’s predominantly palangi, so ultimately, you’re going to have to adapt to that culture.” However, Loa also senses that the same fate was available to him. “I lucked out the way my career went at my school, but I think if it went the way it was supposed to go, I put a lot of blame on the Tongan culture.”

His ethnicity also marked him as he represented his school on the football field. “We were [the private school]’s product of Tonga. We were clean-cut we didn’t wear all the traditional things. We were like Stanford of our football league.” When facing opposing players of Tongan descent, Loa felt some animosity because of their presumed allegiance. “The Tongans don’t like us because we’re with the palangis and the palangis only refer to us when they face people more like us.”

Now attending a university and playing football with his brother with a far more significant Pacific Islander presence, Loa finds himself in a more middling position in terms of place within social groups:

In my situation, I think I’m just stuck. I can play all different roles, I can be with black people, I can be with white people, I can be with Polynesians... The Polynesians know I’m more palangi than Polynesian. The palangis know I’m stuck in the middle kind of thing...it’s not that I want to be palangi, but it’s that I’m comfortable in both settings and they both understand that.

As he competes against opposing players of Pacific Islander, Loa notes, “There’s definitely an underlying connection. An underlying respect because we know the setting they came from and the struggle they had to overcome in order to get where they are as Polynesians. I feel like that’s a respect all cultures have for each other.” Loa reflects on such interactions as stages of maturity in his own identity that have come alongside his success. “In high school it

was ‘You’re the Tongan kid at [private school]’, then as I became more successful it was ‘You’re the Polynesian that made it out of [town].’”

### *Sport as Social Access*

Loa observed early on that his status as a male athlete elevated him above the potential alienation many non-whites face in white space. The same could not be said for his non-white female schoolmates as double-minorities. The social repercussions non-white women face is far harsher than those of their male counterparts, as Loa correctly surmised. In addition to this, the lack of opportunity and public viewership of women’s professional sport plays a role in the lack of status attributed to female athletes.

While Loa was raised in a different community than both Vake and Sela, we still witness how sport plays a larger role in dictating his racialization and cultural identity. The status sport provides him allows him to overcome the hindrances of race because it gave him merit in the eyes of his high school classmates.

It is this intersection of race, cultural identity, and sport, that we see what allowances sport provide Pacific Islander minorities in white majority communities that are largely defined by Caucasian, Black, Asian, and Latino racial groupings.

### *Conclusion*

As we review the intersection of race, sport, and the Tongan diaspora, we look to answer the question of how Tongans are viewed within their chosen places of diaspora. In the experiences of Sela and Vake, we see the default to strains of the “noble savage” and appraisal of Polynesian bodies as commodities. For both, they mention the natural physical comparisons of

themselves and other Tongan and other Pacific Islander athletes against their non-Pacific Islander competitors. Race is a social construct that can be thrust upon an individual regardless of their say so. In this way, we see how the pursuit of being “better” Tongans has symbolically harmed diasporic Tongans.

Despite this, we see how diasporic Tongans combat this as in Loa’s experience. Whereas Sela and Vake face pressures to live up to their racialized identities, Loa uses sport as a way to overcome these racializations in social areas. We see that the prestige that sport grants can be weaponized for diasporic Tongans to use at their disposal. It does not completely shield them from all the obstacles of racialization, but it can overcome many of them.

In this respect, I turn towards the final chapter in looking at how sport has become a pathway to success for Tongans to achieve social mobility and be “better” Tongans.



## CHAPTER 4: PATHWAYS TO SUCCESS

I write this chapter with the intention of analyzing how being “better” Tongans has shaped perceived pathways to success for diasporic Tongans. Through the interviews I compiled, a strong theme of sport as a major pathway for success was apparent. Participants identified it as a potential life changer and most saw it as an easily accessible way of achieving a high level of social status and source of financial stability to provide for their family. For most of the participants, they acknowledged the realities of pursuing a professional athletic career. For most, it is highly unlikely.

In spite of these likelihoods, there are still disproportionate amounts of minorities, especially male, that continue to pursue this pathway. Therein lies an issue that I address as a growing issue in the Tongan diaspora. The reliance on sport as a vehicle for success is rampant among largely poorer and minority communities. Because of this, I look at how diasporic Tongans define success and how they are using sport as means to achieve this. While I cannot offer any permanent resolution to dispelling the myth of sport as a “socioeconomic escalator,” I share the voices of the Tongan diaspora in order to gain a better comprehension of how the myth is sustained among these communities because of the pursuit of being “better” Tongans.

### *Tongan Success*

The final area I investigate the relationship between sport and the Tongan diaspora is how sport has impacted Tongan ideas of success. Much of the larger writings on Tongan migration cite work and education as primary reasons for Tongans leaving the homeland. At the heart of both of those reasons is socioeconomic stability for the family. For Tongans, success is defined as familial as investigated by Cathy Small. “From the vantage point of a village in Tonga,

Tongans left Tonga to be better Tongans-to develop themselves and their families and to improve their lot and status among other Tongans” (Small, 186). With this in mind, when sport is introduced as another potential resource how has it changed those perceptions of valuing work and education in order to provide?

### *Vehicle for Socioeconomic Success*

Tongans are not the first immigrant community to turn to sport as a vehicle for socioeconomic success. I delve into the literature on sport and minority groups in the United States to supplement my research in this area. There are many parallels among the Tongan community and other minority communities in regards to migration patterns and their overrepresentation in sport. In “Fabled Futures: Migration and Mobility for Samoans in American Football,” Lisa Uperesa discusses Samoan football success as a result of “imperial legacies, restricted economic opportunities, and socioeconomic inequality, as well as Samoan community histories and cultural sensibilities that shape approaches to duties, obligation, and status in various locations” (284). In addition to this, Uperesa depicts the formation of the “Polynesian Pipeline” that has established Polynesian men as a high-demand commodity for football programs in the U.S. This inspires my own questions as to how sport is serving as a more effective vehicle of social mobility compared to traditional vehicles?

Supplementing this stance is “Seeking New Fields of Labor,” another work of Uperesa’s. With a far more critical view of sport and its colonial entanglements, Uperesa argues that football has only served to reinforce ideas of U.S. sovereignty in American Samoa. It also illustrates how American Samoan thoughts of diasporic success are being formed. “Football becomes a site for achieving and demonstrating development in the sense of developing young

boys into men and into player prospects, but also in signaling the successful transition of Samoan communities into the modern era” (Uperesa, 227). I compare these assertions to the state of diasporic Tongan communities and the similarities are startling. As Niko Besnier indicates in “The Athlete’s Body and the Global Condition: Tongan Rugby Players in Japan,” Tongans have access to agency and mobility within the global system they never previously possessed. In doing so, they view sport as an opportune vehicle for their success in socioeconomic concerns or cultural pride. Further exploration of this will only ground how sport is shaping the Tongan diaspora.

### *Loa: Revisited*

Introduced in the previous chapter, I return to Loa for his experience at an affluent, private school. However, Loa and his brother were raised in the Tongan way that adhered to strict discipline in respect for authority, churchgoing and, most importantly, knowing one’s place within the family:

Early in every Polynesians’ life the parents have already asserted themselves as the authoritarian figure so when you grow up, there is no going against what they say. There is no standing up for what you believe in...it’s just the way it was...Because it’s so much of a struggle to live in the States, I think Polynesians have to raise their kids really strict and not have to struggle. I think that’s the relation Polynesians have to sport in being able to provide.

Following middle school, Loa and his brother were recruited to play basketball and football at a private high school in a wealthy, white suburb nearby their own neighborhood. “I think going to public school you’re given the freedom to become who you really want to be. You get to mold yourself into the person you want to be way, deep down inside and no one’s going to judge you for it. I mean, everyone goes through the whole stages, but it’s not as [difficult].”

While their own neighborhood was less than ideal in terms of public safety, Loa took the opportunity to attend the school that was “more like real life than his home life.” Speaking in the context of American society, Loa clarifies that his school life was far closer to the realities of American society than his Tongan home life was. The differences he sees between himself and his brother, who rejected the athletic scholarship and decided to attend the local public school closer to home, highlight this. “Coming to college, I feel a lot more prepared than my brother then when he came here. At least I knew that was going on before college, where my brother had no idea...so coming to college was kind of a wakeup call for him.”

Now playing football at the same university, Loa remarks that his brother is “stuck.” While Loa’s brother is able to socialize with some groups, he “builds and burns bridges daily.” This differs from Loa’s daily interactions as he acknowledges that coming from the smaller private school setting taught him to maintain as many good relationships as possible. Loa mentions that this is why he is not “stuck.”

Although he had been recruited to play basketball and football for his high school, he eventually played solely football, which landed him an athletic scholarship to a university. However, Loa learned from his school experience that football was a means to an end rather than an end in itself:

At [private school], because everyone was white and they understood football wasn’t going to be forever for them, we would play and practice...but it was never something we talked about after practice...Having gone to [private school], they didn’t believe I was going to make it to the next level because I went to [private school]. For as good as I was at [private school], because I did that at [private school]...I was not prepared to make it to the league.

While sports may have elevated his status within his school, it would not necessarily translate to success after high school. Because of this, planning for the future and building social

relationships were the focal points for his pathway to success rather than football. “You may not like that person but its still ok to keep them around. It’s still ok to keep them within the network in case you have business or something like that. These are things you practice at a private school.”

Having learned this in high school, Loa sees these deficits in his collegiate teammates experience. “Every Tongan here wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for football. Even, if they had the grades to stay, I doubt they would stay in college for long...I have a feeling that most minorities don’t feel the same, like if football doesn’t go well, it’s going to take a couple years for them to recuperate and be ready for the next step.”

Ultimately, Loa feels that his private high school experience is what has prepared him best for success moving forward:

[My high school] didn’t want me to throw all my marbles in this football basket and hope that it’s gonna work out, they wanted me to get like an academic scholarship somewhere. They wanted me to get something more solid, tangible...The academic experience overall...opened our eyes up in terms of realizing how many people want you to be successful.

### *Stuck Or Options?*

This final account sheds light into another variant of the sport as a pathway for Tongan success. Loa’s private school offered him training in the social capital necessary for success in the United States. Despite growing up in a neighborhood where the ideal of professional sport was the way out, his school grounded his view on sport. As he explains, athletic success at his school was no impressive feat because a professional athletic career was improbable. This cemented sport as a means to an end for Loa. Seeing as his own experience confirmed this, sport had enabled him to attend a private school outside of his own neighborhood, which in turn has

prepared him for life in “the real world.” In spite of this, his education has not come without its price.

As Loa says himself, he identifies as more palangi than Tongan. This has its advantages and disadvantages as it allows him to operate in different settings with relative ease. But, at the same time, he does not fall into one specific category. He is too palangi to be Tongan and too Tongan to be palangi. This is contrasted against his brother, who he describes as being “stuck” at times because he lacks the tact to navigate different social circles. However, he and his brother are more like than one would think. While Loa maintains options to go between groups, he is still “stuck” in a similar fashion to his brother.

This is the price Loa pays for his chosen pathway to success. While this may not be the same for other Tongans that choose to use sport to elevate their status, it is still a possibility. Sport provided a different opportunity in a wealthy and white space, a far cry from the Tongan home he was raised in. As a result, he is prepared more so for white space than Tongan space. Hence, we circle back to the dissonance in diasporic identity. However, Loa views his situation positively in that he is not so much “stuck” in the sense of identity or future options.

Loa’s experience can be contrasted with the following accounts of Pila and Soane as they recount how sport has held hope for them to provide for their families.

### *Pila*

Pila was born and raised in the San Francisco Bay Area amidst a strong Tongan community. “Growing up, I was raised in a Tongan church, so every Sunday I was around a lot of Tongan people.” While he moved during his high school years, he still maintained a strong Tongan identity between two different diasporic Tongan communities. His circle of Polynesian

friends and Tongan church ensured this. “It was easier for me to make friends with Tongans or Polynesians...I think there’s an easy connection just based off similarities in race...The fact that Tongan culture is very family-oriented makes it easier to understand another Tongan.” For his communities, “There’s no shame claiming that you’re Tongan...Tongans aren’t shy to represent where they come from.”

Football games had already been the major family outing as a child for Pila, so continuing to play was imminent. “Growing up, my older cousins’ [football games] was a family event. We’d wake up early in the morning and it would just be an all day event. It was something fun. Family bonding.” Pila had other athletic family members as well. “My dad played rugby and also played football. His brother also played football and made it to the NFL. I think that had influence on myself.”

Attending university on a football scholarship was a major accomplishment for Pila and continued the family’s football playing legacy:

My parents came here so their families can have a better life than they did. So, for me to go to college, it sets a good example for my younger siblings and so hopefully the bar is raised more for the whole family...I think in the college community, there’s more pride because there’s more to be proud of. Just being in college and trying to elevate the family status of going to college and set the bar high for their families and the Tongan community and being a good example...

Although there is familial pressure to succeed and, hopefully, provide for his family, Pila knows it is not “life or death” for his family:

For some it seems more life or death...I think there’s a lot of pressure from the family. You’re good enough to make it to college, you should be able to make it to the NFL and be able to support the family financially...I think [for myself] it’s more self-inflicted pressure...I don’t think sports is the only option...Sports has got me far with this free education. With this free education, I am able to explore different fields outside of sports and so, I’m not too sure yet if sports is what I want to fully pursue. But, I still have the opportunity too, but I am taking my

education seriously also. It's just right because I'm on full scholarship and I'm getting a free education.

While he would love to play professionally one day, a college degree would guarantee a secure future notwithstanding a professional football career. Pila cannot say these sentiments are shared by some of his Tongan peers who he feels come from the "life or death" situation:

I think sports is the number one dream job. I think we all have similar why factors: it's to support the family... "ports is seen as an easy getaway to start a career. I don't know, just naturally, Tongans and Polynesians just want to get into sports. It's seen as a getaway... Tongans usually have the build and the body figure fit for sports. I think it's just seen as a perfect fit. I think sports is seen as a good fit for our bodies, I guess. I think it's more glorified in our community. Professional sports and athletics. I think everyone just wants to be athletes. Because Tongans have the build for it, naturally they're just attracted to sports.

Ultimately, Pila relates his desire to succeed as an example his parents set for him. "I've learned through my parents that family is very important. And so, my Mom did a lot for our family... her working was to support the family... Seeing her working hard trying to support the family, it was something we all just naturally inherit."

As Pila aims to use sport to support his family, in Soane's case, we see that not all diasporic Tongans can rely on the same fortunes.

### *Soane*

Born and raised in a suburb west of Honolulu, O'ahu, Soane was a role for his six younger siblings. He gravitated towards football because he enjoyed the camaraderie of the sport. "It was fun to play because you get that sense of family when you're with your teammates. That's one of the main reasons why I like to play sports." Soane played football throughout high school because of the familial atmosphere and the relaxed schedule. Football also had potential future benefits. "To give you an opportunity to go to school. They give out scholarships. They



help you keep up with your grades in school because without your grades you can't even play, you can't participate in sports. So, it was kind of a motivator to do better in school."

However, the transition the collegiate level was difficult. "High school, I just go to practice and weightlifting, I just go there and walk around. College is like a business. It's like going from community service to working a job. There's a lot of requirements and mandatory things that you have to go. If not then you're not on the team."

In spite of the transition from high school to college and from Hawai'i to the United States, he still enjoyed the brotherhood that football brought:

That family feeling. Especially as a Polynesian, that family is big part of your life and you go and make another family as well. And, that brotherhood, your brothers...you build a bond with them, a friendship it's kinda unique in itself because you do it together in a team sport. You do it together towards one goal: to win football games and go to a bowl game.

The rigorous shared experience bonded Soane with his teammates, both Polynesian and non-Polynesian alike. This was one of the reasons leaving football and returning to Hawai'i was difficult. Soane regards his decision to leave football as a "missed opportunity:

Sports was maybe not for me. I didn't take it too seriously. It's kinda what I call a 'missed opportunity.' It kinda helps you to be better because it has so much resources. But, it's really busy. You don't have to just go to school, you have to do like practice, meetings, conditioning, weightlifting, that's a lot of things. I think I was maybe not into it as much as I was in the beginning.

Soane ruminates over the potential benefits of where a successful collegiate football career could lead:

To try to go the next level. Maybe not NFL, but doing like Canadian football or Europe. Or, probably just do arena football. You make pretty good money. It's that sense of pride you get when you play sports. Most of the time I do things to make my parents proud, that's the main motivator...to help them better their lives as well. Make them not have to work too hard, or harder right now. Better now, then later.

While he contributes to his family by working, taking care of his younger siblings and returning to college, he discusses the pursuit of an athletic career over the more common work of ‘iate for Tongan men in Hawai’i:

They didn’t want to work ‘iate the rest of their life... We use it as a joke sometimes...I guess it’s common because we been doing it a long time. Maybe their fathers are doing it or their uncles. Maybe their aunty’s husband has a business. It’s always easy to find work since we’re all rooted in our families, we have those connections to work because they would want to help out because they’re family.

He closes with other Tongans’ motivations for pursuing an athletic scholarship and career:

They want to move on to the next level and make big money...Others just play football to go to school, get scholarships...Others just wanted to go away and experience life on their own as individuals...It helped them want to pursue higher goals than what was really meant for them to do...depending on where there at it helps them move out of that shelf...creating their own identities...building your own legacy.

### *All In The Family*

As stated in the previous chapter, there is a strong correlation between the Tongan cultural value of family obligation and sport. The camaraderie of team sport is often likened to that of a family as seen in Soane’s account. This is seen across the realm of sports in general, regardless of competition level or other social aspects. However, the familial pressures to provide are both visible and invisible for diasporic Tongans (Besnier, 2011). In Soane’s life, it materializes in his return home and assisting his parents by taking care of his younger siblings. I contextualize Soane’s feeling of a “missed opportunity” as not of the “all-or-nothing” mentality oft associated with some minority athletes pursuing a professional sports career. Instead, it is one in which it was a more accessible way to potentially support his parents financially. Returning to

help his parents' home was not a failure, but a way to give back to them, sacrificing his individual freedom for that of the family. In this way, Soane's experience demonstrates the push and pull of Tongan familism.

Pila's relation of his playing career to his family juxtaposes this. Coming from a lineage of athletes, Pila seeks to uphold his family status. While still wanting to provide and care for his parents financially, he continues his playing career understanding he still has other options to support his family. In spite of this, he still feels familial pressure to succeed in athletics because of his family history.

Comparing Pila and Soane's experiences is interesting because of the dynamics of each of their desires to support their families in different ways. Soane openly sacrificed his own individual playing career to return home and assist his parents, whereas Pila feels compelled to continue playing because of his family. Pila's continued pursuit could be attributed to his family's proven success in professional sport. Nevertheless, the familial pressure he feels to continue playing is reminiscent of the expectation for Tongan males to be providers (Small, 2011). As it manifests itself in conjunction with sport, it can be problematic.

The issue lies in the potential to rely on sport as the only means to an end. Although Pila acknowledges that this is not the reality of his situation, his experience affirms the Tongan cultural expectations of men to be providers for their families. When coupled with the fallacy of sport as a vehicle for success in the diaspora, the conflict is obvious. The conjunction of familial pressure and reliance on sport for financial success is dangerous. Its promise of an accelerated path to economic comfort is alluring as it is false. This is looked over when faced with cultural pushes such as Tongan familism that makes the decision to "go for broke" on a professional sports career. Thus, sport is built as an ideal that crushes more lives than makes them.

In the face of this, we still see how Soane and Pila are aware of these potential pitfalls. Soane acknowledges that a career as a professional athlete would have been the most idealistic way to help his parents instead he opted to return to Hawai'i to work and be closer to home. He attends a local college now to better his contributions to his family. Pila continues to pursue a professional athletic career to fulfill his family's desire for success.

### *Lia and Sesi*

Born to parents of mixed Tongan and Samoan descent among other ethnicities, Lia and Sesi are sisters. Moving across multiple diasporic sites, the sisters spent time in Southern California, American Samoa, and Hawai'i growing up. Light-hearted and upbeat, Lia is the elder of the pair and born in a city outside of Los Angeles in Southern California. The sisters consider this their home in California. Sesi, the reserved younger sister, was born in American Samoa, where the family stayed for parts of their childhood. Eventually, the family moved to Hawai'i, where the sisters attended high school. Describing their experience there, "everyone wanted to be friends with the Samoans because they're athletic, and then they're cool... Everyone wanted to be Samoan... Because they're funny, they're charismatic, they're good at sports... There's barely any Tongans... We were definitely the only mixed ones there."

The sisters both played basketball in high school. Although their own prospects for a future in a professional career were not very high, they enjoyed it nonetheless. Luisa interjects, "I'm just here to travel to other schools!"

For both Lia and Sesi, academics were the focus for them in both high school and now university. "We just did academics because we knew we would do well in academics." Lia still does wish she could still participate in competitive sports. "I'm not gonna lie, if I was really

talented in sports, I would hella do sports, but I'm not so...I wish I was athletic!" Sesi agrees with this. She goes on to say that with academics, one is exposed to a lot more opportunity than focusing on athletics would, especially for Tongan women. "I think the girls would have more of a chance of doing something with themselves...I feel like they have more of a level-head and a strong mind, open mind too. But the boys, because they stay in one section of school life, it's kinda hard for them to branch out to something different."

The sisters both agreed that academics were their likely pathway to success. "We were always gonna go to college... Our parents pushed us to college." But they still lament the opportunity sports hold. "I feel like if I would have started playing basketball when I was younger, I would be like... better at basketball... because I could get scholarships."

When they consider their younger brothers, both Lia and Sesi admit that they wished they were more active athletes because of their potential as students as well:

You know if you're smart and you play sports, you get more scholarships. More colleges want you because you're smart and you play sports, they want you on your team. I feel like it would be a good opportunity for him to try at least a sport, any sport...I just want to go to a game to support someone. Usually, it's a friend, but if it's a family member, it's different.

The sisters go on to lament their brother's potential:

Our brother is like a band geek... he's really tall, but he doesn't play sports...I wanted him to play football, I want to be like a football sister, I want my brother to be in the NFL...You never see a Poly boy, because most of them are into sports, they are just trying to get by so they can play sports. That's why I was weird about my brother being in band, so I was like, 'You don't want to play sports? What kind of Polynesian boy are you?!'

The sisters find it more humorous, than devastating, as they prefer he make his own path. "[It's] not really [a big issue]. If he doesn't want to play sports, I think if he's really good at

academics, he should just go for academics...I feel like if he played sports, it would be a good fall back in the future.”

With this in mind, the sisters reflect on the other Polynesians they have grown up with. “A lot of the Polynesian people we graduated with, if you see them now, they’re not really in school or they don’t take their education seriously...I don’t want to say it’s stereotypical, but that’s the way at least.” The sisters reconcile that a professional athletic career is fragile. “When you get injured, what are you gonna do with your life after?” Lia questions. “It’s really like a longshot to be in the NFL, academics would be a good fallback.” Both Lia and Sesi comment on some of the Polynesian athletes’ academic goal at their own university:

Starting families and getting any job they can. Not really Polynesians being lawyers, or the typical palangi, ‘Oh, I’m gonna be a lawyer! A doctor, scientist.’ Because I’ve noticed most of the people who [are] in sports are [majoring] in sociology and, like...they take easier classes. I don’t know what they’re gonna do with that after...It’s kinda hard to get a job even if you have a good bachelor’s degree, even after college. So either way, even if they were taking harder classes, it will be hard either way to find a job. Because you have to know people...when people play sports, they’re kinda in the athletic circle and like they don’t branch out into more professional, I guess...

In spite of this, Lia and Sesi recognize sport as a factor in bringing recognition to Polynesian communities, “More people know about Samoans and Tongans in sports.” Seeing many Polynesians come to prominence in the NFL, she hopes to have “a family member on the team:”

Just to have like a family member on the team, or in the league, is just like cool... In America, football is the sport that everyone wants to play or everyone watches. It makes them like feel stronger. It shows their strength... there’s more support...I think going out and supporting your family members is what I would do. What I would like to do if any of my siblings played sports... It’s like an American thing...

While they do not have a sibling in professional sports, the sisters still feel a connection to Polynesians that they do see. “Polynesians in general, like in a professional sport like I feel like we’re related and like proud... We feel proud of them because like they actually... they made it... like making a name for yourself...doing something.”

This pride comes from a feeling that Polynesians are not respected as successful:

I feel like people look down on Polynesians. So, when they become successful and make a name for themselves, it’s like ‘Oh, my gosh...if he can do it, we can do it too!’...I feel like we support them a lot more because they’re Polynesian. You see a lot of people in the NFL are white or black, you never see any Polynesian people. So, when Mariota came out, everyone was so hyped.

Sesi references the success of Marcus Mariota, a Hawaiian-born Samoan quarterback in the NFL. Lia goes on to comment that doing so allows her self to “live vicariously through you.” She closes with her own remark as to why she feels such a connection and desire to support Polynesian players, “I wish I played football. I’m making my brother do sports because I wish I could do sports. I feel like that’s the reason, because I wish I was an NFL player.”

### *Brothers and Sisters*

Lia and Sesi demonstrate an interesting dynamic that intermixes family, gender, and sport. While the sisters had their opportunity to play sport they realized their futures lay in academics, but this did not mean they gave up on sport. As they say themselves, they wish they had “a family member on the team.” The way they see it sport is a means of being known and representing Tongans, Samoans, and Pacific Islanders alike. For Lia, she sees it as important for Pacific Islanders to be represented as such because they are such a small population. In a way, it also confirms their own identities as Pacific Islanders seeing their own people modeled as such.

This is the sisters' primary push for wishing their brothers would be professional athletes one day. I once again revisit the idea of success and this is one way in which it materializes. The cultural value of being successful manifests itself in the familial success. Because success for Tongan women in sport is untold and undersold, Lia and Sesi attach themselves to Tongan familism and sacrificing their own individualism for that of the family. This experience does not account for all Tongan women as we have read previously and is definitely not shared by Ele.

It is through Ele and Pita in the following accounts that we see the success sport has promised diasporic Tongans in their pursuit of being "better" Tongans. Pita provides the more traditional story of success for his family via professional sport as he seeks to duplicate the success that his brothers have already achieved. However, for Ele, we see an account that runs counter to Lia and Sesi'i in that she finds success in the sporting world without ever having stepped on the field as an actual player.

### *Ele*

Ele self-identifies as a proud Tongan woman from one of the rougher neighborhoods on O'ahu in Hawai'i. "[Our town] is sort of a rough area ... there's always a sense of pride coming out from that area." Ele explains that this led to some stereotypes for her and her Polynesian friends. "We were looked at as being the rowdy kids. You know the typical Polynesian image of being rowdy, uneducated type of stuff, type of image. More so the loud crowd, more than anything." Sports were common for the Tongan community in her area. "It was typical, like girls had to go play volleyball and boys go into football. If you could go into basketball... If you want to do extracurricular activities, sports was it."



Growing up around football, Ele's path into the administration side of the game began early in high school. "Every Sunday, everyone's watching football. So, every Sunday I had no choice but to watch it too. I grew to love it because even, just playing in the neighborhood with all my family and friends, football was the thing." She explains that initially she could not attend any of the games in high school because her parents disallowed it, but after becoming team managers with her cousins, she began filming games for the team. "Before that the only time I could go to football games was when I was in the band... That was the only time I could go to the football games... [The coaches said,] 'They want to be on the field, so you go up there and film' ...It didn't even come to me that I would do it at a university or collegiate level..."

Now, working as an assistant for a collegiate football team, Ele is undaunted by her unique presence in a Caucasian, male-dominated work space. Her unabashed pride and enthusiasm carry over into her thoughts on the growing Tongan presence on the field and potentially continuing to be involved in sport off of it:

Tongans in collegiate sports, at least in America, we're starting to gain more attention. There's starting to be an increasing number of us being involved in signing day...I think we're being recognized more. I think that's what it is in general, but when you get deeper into it like ok being a player, yeah there's plenty of us playing in sports, there's plenty of us going into school, they got offers a handful get offers, but when you go deeper, if I look at the college industry, and my department specifically, I see this as a post athletic student career...If they don't go professional, there's really a smaller number of us that look into different outlets going into sports. Like going into coaching, there's not that many that think 'Oh ok, if I don't go pro, how about I be a GA (graduate assistant) and start my coaching career that way.' I think there's not many that think that way or pursue that route.

She continues to comment on the lack of Tongans in her field:

I've never run into another Tongan college student doing the same thing or Tongan assistant. I've already traveled for like four seasons to other opponents and we'll meet the staff here and there. I've probably run into a Tongan guy or Samoan guy from [one school]... Tongans in this type of work...no I basically

haven't seen any. Coaches, maybe two to three Tongan coaches...when I come across them, I appreciate it...I see more names for players. The coaching staff, it's growing. The one thing I thought was amazing was BYU's current staff. We have the first Tongan head coach in Division 1 football. But, then his supporting staff, like I didn't even count it, but it is mainly Tongans. Which I thought is freakin awesome, you know? It's like a beautiful thing. So yeah, it's a growing thing for our Tongans to be in. I'm just so excited I like seeing different changes.

However, the growing presence of Tongan athletes makes her feel as though sport is becoming the "new 'Iate University." It is a common stereotype of Tongan males to go into 'iate, or construction work, if they have no education, other employment or training:

Here in Hawai'i...their profession was rockwall building and it's become so common that it's a joke. Not a joke, but like 'that's my uncle!' 'Iate High. 'Iate University. I can't stand it, you know? So that's the typical mold you see Tongans in for me growing up...having our mothers take any housekeeping job or tauhi vai vai job. Whatever was the norm to me to see my parents do, if I saw someone else doing otherwise and being successful at it, like being successful at it...I felt good. We are capable of doing things outside of the rockwall or doing things outside of caregiving...I think [sports] has already become the new 'iate thing...with us going into sports, it was typical. If you want to do sports go into football, if you want to sports as a woman, go into volleyball. If you can do other things, great, other sports great. I think it has become a new 'iate university, 'iate high not to that same extent, but I think it's up there.'

Ele equates football with 'iate to say it is an easily accessible means of attaining a more secure means of economic status. This is underlined when Ele relates her relatives' shock to find out her brother was solely attending college and not playing football:

I remember when my brother first came to [university], if I visited distant relatives from elsewhere and, you know, we're just catching up I'm like,

'Yeah, my brother is in college with us.'

And they're like, 'Oh, is he playing sports? Is he on the football team?'

....'And I'm like no'

...I'm like why is that so surprising? I think it's become a stereotype in a way. For anyone that doesn't fit that mold, if they're just in school strictly for academics, it's not frowned upon, definitely not, but it's not assumed. It's not one of the assumptions we go into 'Oh yeah, they're in college for school and not sports.'

In spite of the prevalent 'iate stereotype, she remarks that while most of these athletes have the goal of achieving a college degree, the ultimate goal lies in making it to the professional ranks:

In our Tongan community, you go to school as a student-athlete and obviously the goal is to get a degree. But then, you can't help but ignore the ultimate goal is to go pro and all the things that come with going pro...The money that comes with it and what it could mean to your family and for yourself and what not. Obviously, I think the goal in the community is do well in school, if you go to college and you're lucky to get a scholarship, ok do well, play well, ok, get your degree, that's important, but then the main thing is to go pro. A lot of people set their sights on going pro or thinking how you can make being an athlete a career. I think the focus is on that. But, when plans change and when people come to grips with how difficult it is to like go pro...I think that's when people start to think outside the box, to think of other ways to still be involved with sports without being an athlete or the requirement of being an athlete. Then, that's when they think about, 'Oh maybe I could go coach or maybe I could go do things within collegiate sports or even professional sports.' You know working on the administration side. I think the reason it's not popular is the goal is to be involved in athletics, you have to be an athlete and not the administration or the coaching part of it.

On a personal note, Ele finds pride in seeing the Tongans in the NFL:

Growing up in America, you always see the white man succeeding, here in Hawai'i, my surroundings were my Asian community, my Asian and Native Hawaiian community. If you're able to see anybody get recognized for anything, get an award or be on TV for something...it wouldn't be a Tongan person. Most commonly, it wouldn't be a Tongan person...Having people recognize Tongans for good things in the public eye is a great thing...Seeing Tongans on a big scale, on a big stage. Having the background that I have now, in collegiate sports, I know when I see other Tongans, I feel some type of way. Even though I may not know them, I'm just like, 'Oh yes, it's good to have another Tongan person there.' So, pride in that sense is good. I have this feeling we're making it, we're coming up and we're on this come up, in American society at east. Because when you look at NFL, professional sports at least. The NFL is the highest level of that industry so to have more Tongans come up that way. Your people on the big stage, Tongan people on the big stage, you feel good to be Tongan because you see another Tongan up there...Then not just to have a Tongan that you know of, but a Tongan that you're related to, that translates to how you feel about your family and being successful...being able to see somebody who is of your family on that stage.

She feels that entering the professional career in sports as a player is a sign of success for the Tongan community from a familial perspective. “You wanna say your brother is a pro... It comes with this idea of success. You know, we put this brother of mine, cousin of mine, friend of mine, put in this much years to play and they’re this skilled at this sport that they went pro and like just having the idea of being a super athlete...being able to show off.”

Ele goes on to reflect on the meaning of success for the Tongan community:

Growing up, the idea of success was everything to me. If you weren’t successful, whatever that may be, then life would be a little bit more difficult. I think success translates into security for your family...In some families, success is having a job and being able to have money. I’m trying to think from parents’ perspective. As long as their kid is making money and as long as they’re able to ask their kid for money and for help and their kid can provide for them or they can provide for their own families, that’s success in itself...For my family, we went into college, we knew the goal was to get a degree. Because we graduated with our degree, our BA, all of a sudden we’re successful, that’s you know, they were able to achieve that, and then on top of that, you have to get a job, there’s life beyond that...The next step to being successful is finding a job and being able to support not only yourself, but your family, your family needs and obligation.

Ele shares her final thoughts on how sport has impacted her life:

In a way it’s a good thing to be in sports, but in another way it’s become a glorified system for, if you’re Poly, if you’re Tongan, you need to be in sports to have an identity, I guess, to have a purpose as to what you’re doing elsewhere...I think we can be successful outside of being an athlete. My experience here and seeing other Tongan coaches in other collegiate staffs. I think we can be successful outside of sports...Tongans are capable of doing things outside of just sports, even though we have a growing identity in professional sports I think it just reiterates that we’re capable of doing more.

Ele acknowledges that her pathway into sports is atypical, but she also concludes that she has found success where many others have not:

For me, I learned early on sports wasn’t my thing...I think on a smaller scale in high school, I was like ‘Holy crap! I’m not playing sports!’ and everyone else is playing sports, so it had some kind a effect on me. That sucks I’m not apart of that circle. But, I was never like extremely cut off from the community it was just my own personal experience...Seeing that, I can only imagine what it feels like for a

guy, maybe a Tongan guy, who has hopes to play college sports and...not being able to go to the college level...I can see the difficulty in that.

Finally, she laughs at the irony of the situation as she exclaims, “I made it on a D1 roster before half of the fools I met in high school!”

Ele’s pride is well earned. She has found success through sport in a unique way in which few Tongans, let alone Tongan women, have. While it is unique now, Ele’s success hopefully points to others soon joining her on the administrative side of sport in order to achieve success. On the other hand, Pita and his family present the traditional route of sporting success for many Tongans.

### *Pita*

Pita is one of seven children, six being boys, who were raised in a suburb near Los Angeles in Southern California and sports have been a cornerstone of their lives:

All of us played football and all of us got D1 scholarships...I was young. I have older brothers that did it. I was like I wanted to do it... [My parents] were actually putting us in sports because schooling is expensive. They for sure couldn’t pay for one of the seven kids to do one year in college, so it was like, get a scholarship or go to work because we don’t have money for school. Those were the options.

Two of his elder brothers have gone on to play professionally in the NFL. The success has never clouded his brothers’ purpose for playing though as they are constantly reminded they are playing for their parents:

Never personal. I never really thought other than doing it for my parents. Like me, I could care less what I do for me, I’m just here to return the favor to my parents. It’s all hard work, sweat and tears. You know they had their head on for us to put us in these places that we are at today. It’s only right that we can return the favor. I mean, we can’t do nothing for them. They’re older, but just like little things like fixing up the house.

Raised in a community with a large Tongan presence, Pita saw most Tongan men stay in following high school and work 'iate. "There's a big Tongan community, I actually live in a neighborhood where there's a lot of Tongans in like, just that one small neighborhood... Everyone was a construction worker at my church, it was like only some people hold government jobs. Like, some of the men."

While some had the opportunity to leave, because of athletic scholarships, most of them wound up at the local community college. "Nobody went to a four-year but my brothers... All the other people that tried the JC route, they didn't even finish school." Pita explains why he feels most of the Tongan men in his community did continue academic and athletic careers. "They were just too lazy to go to school and always just wanted be around the block. They'd just hang out and chilled... I'd probably do the same thing if I was home."

It was his father's backing that would help Pita escape this pattern:

If I had to go to work, straight out of high school, it would probably be in construction. But my Dad, he don't even like construction, he's a postman. He's like:

'Why break your back when you can go get a degree and go sit an office or something.'

[My brothers and I would say,] 'Man, we don't want to sit in office!'

'Well, you don't want to do construction, so pick what you want to do.'

Seeing his father work as a postal worker and the other Tongan men working labor-intensive jobs, Pita was compelled to do something that would help alleviate his father's burden. Thus, he accepted an athletic scholarship to play football in college.

While Pita blames his parents for getting him to fall in love with sports before school, he still has plans for a professional career:

[My parents] tricked us. They made us like the sport more than anything else. You fall in love with sport... You really like football and school comes along and your parents are like, 'Oh look, you can't do football if you don't have good grades.'

And I'm like, 'Damn, I gotta have good grades. I have to get good grades or else I can't play and I want to play and I rather play than go to school.' Well, this is what you gotta do.

With some exposure to the professional experience through his brothers' careers, Pita recalls advice they have shared with him about breaking into the professional ranks:

It's hard to get in, but it's even harder to stay in the NFL. So, we just got to work hard now to get in. Once you get in, people will see your name and they either like you or you don't...Competition is there 24/7. Somebody is there to take your job. You can't mess up, you can't get hurt. If you get hurt, that sucks even more, you really lost your job and you got to work your way back up...Everybody is going to work everyday, grinding.

When asked if he feels pressure to live up to his brothers' legacies, Pita responds, "I don't feel pressure. I just want to make it. That's still my dream I had ever since I was little. He's living his, I'm trying to live mine. I don't feel the pressure, I just feel like if he was able to do it, I could do it. What makes it different from to me. That's how I look at it. We both make it the more money for my parents."

Regardless of a professional athletic career, Pita still had future plans:

I want to be a sports counselor ... athletes only. Tell them how it really goes down. I feel like my counselor in high school, she knew of it, not know nothing about it...If someone is struggling and needs a vision of the future, I want to be there to help them, really understand, 'This is what I missed in high school. This is something my counselor didn't tell me that I wanted to know in high school.' You know what I mean? I wanted to be that counselor.

Sharing his reality will better prepare the next generation of athletes from his area, both Tongan and non-Tongans. This is because he feels the sporting experience in college drastically differs from that in high school. "In college, you're a walking label. You're a label to your football team. In high school, you're just another high school kid. Trying to make something of your name. In college, you're already somewhat already made an identity of your name."

### *Different Approaches, Same Results?*

As I review the experiences with sport of Ele and Pita, they could not be more different. Ele's work behind the scenes is an untold and uncommon pathway to success in sport. As a member of the support staff for the football team at her university, Ele has worked her way not only into higher education, but also into a potential occupation. Although this is not dissimilar to pursuing a professional athletic career, Ele's position is far more secure in that it provides professional training she can do throughout her lifetime. The risk of a career in professional athletics not only lies in the high improbability of it, but also in its length and sustainability (Uperesa, . With this in mind, Ele has created her own space in sport that is not beholden to athleticism and physical attributes.

Ele's experience in sport is a stark contrast to Pita. Pita and his brothers' success in sport has come through the more popular narrative of rising out of a "disadvantaged" community and finding success in sport. Speaking of his brothers' successes in making the NFL, "it's easy to get in, it's hard to stay in." Having experienced the impact of a professional athletic career on his family, Pita is aware of the effort needed to achieve success in sport at the professional level. This is what makes his brothers' advice a reality as in the professional ranks, "you're competing for your job everyday." The constant insecurity of one's job and pressure to perform makes a professional athletic career both challenging and alluring, especially for those inexperienced with it.

The differences between Ele and Pita's lives are apparent. While one has a stable position with a clear career path, the other has hopes for one career with a backup plan. Tongan familism factors significantly into Pita's life, whereas it is not as visible in Ele's. This could be contributed to both their gender and position in their family. While Pita experiences some of the push to



succeed on behalf of his parents, it is not as discernible. This could be attributed to the fact that he is not the eldest male sibling, being the sixth child of seven. But, it could also be caused by the success of his brothers that have alleviated some of the pressure to succeed that is palpable in Pila and Soane's experiences.

Ele differs greatly in this respect. Her experience does not intersect with the same cultural expectations as Pita's. As a self-described "Tongan woman in collegiate sports," she unconsciously acknowledges that her experience is uncommon both culturally and socially. Coming from the administrative and supporting staff side of sport, Ele works in an overlooked sector of sport. Her role is important in ensuring the success of the overall team through strategic preparation. This enabled her to go to the football games her parents barred her from attending when she was younger because that was not what Tongan girls did." She does not adhere to the same "provider" and "leader" expectation as her Tongan male counterparts. Instead, Ele achieves her own success by subverting the expectations of Tongan women to work within the home (Morris, 2009). While she embodies the expectation of being hard working and respectful, Ele goes against many cultural norms by working within sport and making it a more accessible for both women and Tongans in general. I expand further on Ele's experience and the impact of gender and Tongan female presence in sport and the diasporic experience in another chapter.

### *Conclusion*

For many Tongans, sport is a pathway to success. It is not the only one, but it is a viable one. From the Tongan perspective, success is seen as "being a better Tongan" (Small, 2011). This is defined most visibly as fulfilling familial obligation, a major Tongan cultural value. Many young diasporic Tongans use sport as a means to do this and fulfill the different means of

how. Although they may not adhere to all Tongan cultural values, taking care of one's family is an important one that one cannot simply ignore. Because of this, Tongans turn to sport with the hopes a professional career. The idealistic image of professional sports in Tongan diasporic communities promotes and suffuses these false aspirations.

In spite of this, some Tongans resist and overcome these fallacies in order to maintain their familial obligation. Although it does not speak for all Tongan families and their experiences, it is encouraging nevertheless that sport has helped diasporic Tongans become "better" Tongans. Whether it has been through a professional sporting career or an administrative one, it is clear how Tongans have used sport to fulfill their migrant ideology.

## CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

At the onset of this work, I looked to figure how sport is shaping the Tongan diasporic experience. I did this out of pure personal interest and observation. I was intrigued having grown up around sport and seen how it has made or broken lives. The allure of a professional athletic career promised much, but rarely fulfilled. Looking at my own family, I found inspiration for this project. If my family had succeeded and gained so much because of sport, were others reaping the same benefits? In my mind, I already I felt I knew the answer to that considering the daunting statistics of minority immigrant communities and their overrepresentation in professional sports. However, I was undeterred in this undertaking.

As I took this personal interest and experience in sport as a vehicle for success, I also was going through my own personal identity struggles. Having been raised Tongan, but often questioned about my ethnicity from Tongans and non-Tongans alike, I felt the need to discover myself. This birthed the idea for my project.

Sport, basketball specifically, had always been a place where I knew my role and myself. In the world, I was unsure of who I was after being questioned and berated over how I could be Tongan if I didn't speak the language or didn't look Tongan. Unlike the real world, I knew I was a basketball player on the court and was recognized as such. In this manner, I fashioned my work after my own personal experience. As someone who did not embody the typical physical characteristics and cultural mannerisms of being Tongan, were others facing the same issues?

This is where "being a better Tongan" came into play and served as the overarching framework for this project. Sport had always served as my comforter because my skill acknowledged me as a basketball player. This identity built my own confidence in my Tongan identity and affirmed through Cathy Small's research. Using the Tongan immigrant ideology of

“being a better Tongan” as my foundation, I sought out twelve other Tongans, who had all been raised outside of Tonga, in order to discern their experiences.

### *Findings*

Sitting down and talking to each participant proved both fascinating and therapeutic. As you read through each account, many of their personal triumphs and tribulations are displayed. While I frame them within the perspective of becoming “better” Tongans and sport, the reality of their experiences breaks through. I attempt to categorize them throughout this work, but the nuances and complexities of their narratives overlap and spill into each other like a mosaic.

I begin by first discussing how Tongan cultural identity is reinforced by sport. Seini’s community demonstrates how sport contributes to strengthening the Tongan influence and preserving a strong Tongan identity outside of Tonga. I review how the diasporic Tongan view of being “better” Tongans has come into conflict with traditional gender roles because of sport. From Eseta and Losa’s perspectives, we see how Tongans “self police” the cultural identity of other Tongans. While Losa uses sport to rebel against the Tongan cultural expectations of her, she still maintains a strong Tongan identity.

Tongans also use sport as a vehicle to express a greater Pacific Islander identity through the haka. Although this is contested amongst performers of it. Some see it as a powerful cultural representation of their people, while others feel the sporting context of the performance erases such cultural significance. From both viewpoints, we see claims at how Tongan and Pacific Islander identity should and should not be performed. This echoes the “self policing” nature of Tongans, but it also demonstrates the difference in how Tongans view the others’ perceptions of their identity and how it is performed (Lavaka, 2014).

By discussing how diasporic Tongans are racialized through sport, we see how the pursuit of being “better” Tongans have problematized and stunted their access to other arenas of success. I use the stories of Sela and Vake as my primary examples to explain how Tongans are racialized and this is internalized in the diaspora. With Sela, she finds sport as a means of making her feel Tongan. Although I appreciate that sport is a means for her to create an identity, it also reveals the internalized racism thrust upon her as a Tongan and Pacific Islander. Host lands view Tongans as working bodies for physical labor (Uperesa, 2014). This is underscored by Vake’s narrative of being seen as an athlete and being grouped alongside other Pacific Islanders as one in his pre-dominantly white school. Although this is not the first time immigrant communities have faced racialization and alienation in Hawai’i, it can be seen as demonstrative of other spaces that Tongans are occupying outside of Tonga (Labrador, 2015).

Lastly, Tongans have sustained the myth of sport as a vehicle for social mobility because of their decision to use sport to “be better Tongans.” Seeing it as a pathway for success, Tongans pursue professional sport as a means to provide for their families. Tongan familism pushes for Tongans to provide for their families out of respect for raising them, but also out of pressure to remember this debt (Lee, 2003). Aside from a playing career, we also see how some diasporic Tongans, like Ele, are finding secure pathways in sport that fulfill the same goal as those who participate in the playing side. With that being said, sport still provides a means for some to prepare for life outside of sport. Loa demonstrates this as he takes advantage of the schooling football provided for him as it gives him options to operate outside of his Tongan upbringing. This does not come without its price as he at times feels more palangi than he does Tongan because of this exposure. Ultimately, I find that Tongans use sport as a means to elevate their own status on behalf of their family. The imparting of Tongan cultural values is strong in

maintaining this and continues to convince Tongans to pursue sport as a career, despite the improbability and insecurity of it.

While I cover a vast array of social issues in the Tongan diaspora, the presence of gender is persistent throughout most narratives. It is prevalent as many diasporic Tongans feel restrained by the expectations of Tongan culture that are thrust upon them despite living outside of Tonga. This problematizes the Tongan culture in the diaspora as Tongan women adapt and reinvent the ideal Tongan women through sport.

Ultimately, I contend that sport has shaped the Tongan diasporic experience in a largely impactful way. It reveals cultural inconsistencies along the lines of identity and gender by calling into question of who can and cannot perform this identity. Sport also reveals the gatekeeper mentality of Tongans in regards to culture as different generations attempt to rein in the evolving and shifting forms of Tongan identity. It has proved to be the most popular and public way of achieving success, especially for Tongan males. Sport also demonstrates the strength of Tongan familism for better or worse as it both motivates and discourages the younger generations. Lastly, and most importantly, sport provides a space for cultural, generational, familial, and personal clash that can create identity for those needing it.

### *Future Projects*

The knowledge I have gathered in this work has exposed me to a variety of experiences and complexities within the Tongan culture and diaspora that are worthy of further research. Religion and spirituality presents a dilemma for many diasporic Tongans as they demonstrate athletic and academic potential. They are forced to reveal which they value more in terms of Tongan cultural values. This is seen in Seini's community on the North Shore of O'ahu.

Religion, spirituality, and the church have been a consistent presence in the Pacific and Tonga since the first ancestors crossed the oceans and settled the islands. To this day, indigenous spirituality and Christianity maintain a strong presence throughout Oceania. It is unsurprising that its people would continue this outside of the islands.

Within this context, it is easy to see how serving the church complicates decisions of whether to pursue a professional athletic career. Steeped in cultural entanglements, religion has an influence on Tongan communities that rivals any other influences or authorities. Especially when considering the strict adherence to Tongan culture amongst such communities, the command of the church is clear.

This is what frustrates Seini as it presents a clash of cultural values. On one hand, Tongans value achieving success to be “better Tongans.” This can be through attaining financial security or by supporting the family. On the other hand, Tongans hold a strong commitment to their faith, which is often physically embodied by the church. Hence, serving the church would be another marker of being a “better Tongan.” This is where the conflict occurs as diasporic Tongans are presented with an ultimatum of what they believe is more significant and to be a “better Tongan.”

Choosing between the two is truly difficult as it decides between what diasporic Tongans value more. This clearly implicates many other issues after one’s choice, but it is frustrating for people like Seini who can see the high potential in one means over the other.

Aside from religion, I believe there is more to be explored regarding the Pacific Islander experience as student-athletes in higher education institutions. Many accounts refer to this, as Pita mentions the lack of knowledge imparted to him by his counselors in high school. Lia and Sesi mention the difficulties for athletes to expand their academic and social circles because of

the rigid schedule of athletics. Sela and Soane's experiences both reveal the difficulties of maintaining such a life style and achieving their own personal goals. It is these issues that spur me to research these inconsistencies of the "student-athlete" lifestyle further for the sake of Pacific Islanders.

### *Final Thoughts*

I embraced sport because it embraced me. Unlike the dual worlds I was forced to navigate because of my identity as a Tongan in the United States, sport gave me an identity that had no need for me to represent anything other than myself. While the push-and-pull of my ethnic and cultural identity still has me conflicted, sport provides a place where I feel I can create my own identity and own it. Where I do not have to live up the expectations of others as most Tongans do because of familial ties and social representation. It is in sport that I exercise my own agency to create my own life, and, in that way, I may be even more Tongan than I think.

I wanted acceptance and that is what sport offered me. Acceptance. On the field, I received recognition that I didn't receive from the Tongan community and why I rejected it so early on in life. While I now accept this identity, I still feel the distance between the Tongan community and myself. This is not the same with the sporting community. I long to be a member of this community because it has comforted me and never disowned me nor alienated me. While I have sometimes been disrespected, it has never been indifferent to me. Because of it, I have found a me that wasn't me before.



## *Postface*

Somewhere along the road to completing this work, I realized something.

I realized that solely being Tongan or not being Tongan has never defined my own identity. I will always be too White to be Tongan, too Tongan to be Black, too Black to be Asian, and too Asian to be White. I cannot claim one over the other, nor can I reject one over the other. I embody characteristics from all these cultures, but some reveal themselves more vividly than others.

My identity has never been solely identified by sport or lack thereof. Although I always wanted it to be, my love for knowledge and culture prevented me from pigeonholing myself to that one identity and has exposed me to experiences I doubt sport could have.

The Bay Area has never solely defined my identity. I will always be too much of an islander for the Bay. But, too Bay for the islands. While I always maintain my love for the Bay Area and California, I found a love for the aina I now stay.

I now accept many of these things that I am and am not. I am at peace with this and am excited for the Lord's plan for my life from here on out. I know this is not the end, as there is no real end for any journey, whether physical, mental, or spiritual. It is all a process of growth. You either choose to grow or remain the same as your surroundings change around you.

For myself, I have chosen to grow by improving the things that I can and embracing what I cannot. It is through this work I have chosen to grow and not only embrace my identity and improve my sense of self-worth, but I hope I have been able to help others in doing the same.

Whether Tongan or non-Tongan, athlete or non-athlete, or student or non-student, I hope you found a bit of yourself in my writings and I sincerely hope that you are made better for it.

If that new boy on the playground can find comfort in who he is, so can you.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Besnier, Niko, "The Athlete's Body and the Global Condition: Tongan Rugby Players in Japan," *American Ethnologist: Journal of the American Ethnological Society*, Vol. 39, Issue 3 (2012): 491-510.
- Besnier, Niko, *On the Edge of the Global: Modern Anxieties in a Pacific Island Nation*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011.
- Besnier, Niko, "Sports, Bodies, and Futures: An Epilogue," *The Contemporary Pacific: A Journal of Island Affairs*, Vol. 26, No. 2, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press (2014): 435-447.
- Clifford, James, "Diasporas," *Cultural Anthropology* Vol. 9 No. 3 (1994): 302-338
- Creswell, James W. *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4<sup>th</sup> ed). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2013.
- Desmond, Jane, *Staging Tourism: Bodies on Display from Waikiki to Sea World*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1999.
- Diaz, Vicente, "Tackling Pacific Hegemonic Formations on the American Gridiron," *Amerasia Journal* Vol. 37 No. 3 (2011): 90-113.
- Francis, Steven Tupai, "The View from 'Home' - Transnational Movements from Three Tongan Villages," *Migration and Transnationalism: Pacific Perspectives*, edited by Helen Lee and Steven Tupai Francis, Australia National University: ANU E Press (2009): 203-214.
- Grainger, Andrew. "Rugby Island Style: Paradise, Pacific People, and the Racialisation of Athletic Performance." *Junctures* (June 2009): 45-63.
- Hau'ofa, Epeli. "Our Sea of Islands," In *We Are The Ocean: Collected Works*, 27-40. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press. First published in *A New Oceania: Rediscovering Our Sea of Islands*, edited by Eric Waddell, Vijay Naidu, and Epeli Hau'ofa, 2-17. Suva: University of the South Pacific School of Social and Economic Development (1993).
- Henderson, April K. "Gifted Flows: Netting The Imagery of Hip-Hop Across The Sāmoan Diaspora." MA Thesis, University of Hawai'i-Mānoa, 1999.
- Hereniko, Vilsoni, "Representations of Cultural Identities," *Inside Out: Literature, Cultural Politics, and Identity in the New Pacific*, edited by Vilsoni Hereniko and Rob Wilson, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc. (1999): 137-166.
- Hokowhitu, Brendan, "'Physical beings': Stereotypes, sport and the 'physical education' of New Zealand Maori." *Culture, Sport, Society: Cultures, Commerce, Media, Politics*, 6:2-3. (2003): 192-218.

- Hokowhitu, Brendan, "Tackling Māori Masculinity: A Colonial Genealogy of Savagery and Sport" *The Contemporary Pacific*, 16(2). Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press (2004): 259–284.
- Ka'ili, Tevita, "Tauhi va: Nurturing Sociospatial Ties in Maui and Beyond," *The Contemporary Pacific: A Journal of Island Affairs Vol. 17, No. 1*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press (2005): 83-114.
- Labrador, Roderick, *Building Filipino Hawai'i*, Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2015.
- Lavaka, Kacy, "Navigating Identities: The Construction and Maintenance of Ethnic Identity for Second Generation Tongan Americans," MA Thesis, University of Hawai'i-Mānoa, 2014.
- Lee, Helen Morton, *Becoming Tongan: An Ethnography of Childhood*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1996.
- Lee, Helen Morton, "Creating Their Own Culture: Diasporic Tongans," *The Contemporary Pacific*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (1998): 1-30.
- Lee, Helen (Morton), *Tongans Overseas: Between Two Shores*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i, 2006.
- Lee, Helen (Morton), "Pacific Migration and Transnationalism: Historical Perspectives," *Migration and Transnationalism: Pacific Perspectives*, edited by Helen Lee and Steven Tupai Francis, Australia National University: ANU E Press (2009): 7-42.
- Macpherson, Cluny and La'avasa Macpherson, *The Warm Winds of Change: Globalisation in Contemporary Sāmoa*, Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2009.
- Manarpaac, Christine, "Head & Shoulders: Representations of Polynesian Men in the NFL." MA Thesis Portfolio, University of Hawai'i-Mānoa, 2014.
- Moala, Kalafi, *In Search of the Friendly Islands*, New Zealand: Pasifika Foundation Press, 2009.
- Morris, Avigail, "Nine a Side Basketball in the Kingdom of Tonga: A Case Study in Negotiating Gender Roles," In *Transactions at Play*, edited by Cindy Dell Clark, 22-44. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2009.
- Small, Cathy, *Voyages: From Tongan Villages to American Suburbs*, Second Edition, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1999, 2011.
- Spickard, Paul and G. Reginald Daniel, *Racial Thinking in the United States*, Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004.

- Teaiwa, Teresia, "Reading Paul Gauguin's Noa Noa with Epeli Hau'ofa's Kisses in the Nederends: Militourism, Feminism, and the "Polynesian" Body," *Inside Out: Literature, Cultural Politics, and Identity in the New Pacific*, edited by Vilsoni Hereniko and Rob Wilson, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc. (1999): 249-264.
- Tengan, Ty P. Kāwika, and Jesse Makani Markham, "Performing Polynesian Masculinities in American Football: From 'Rainbows to Warriors,'" *International Journal of the History of Sport*, Vol. 26, Issue 16 (December 2009): 2412-2431.
- Teu, Aiona, "Tongan communities in California," *New Neighbours: Islanders In Adaptation*, edited by Cluny Macpherson, Bradd Shore, and Robert Franco, Santa Cruz: Center for South Pacific Studies University of California: 44-46.
- Tupouniua, Penisimani, *A Polynesian Village: The process of change in the village of Hoi, Tonga*. Suva: South Pacific Social Sciences Association, 1977.
- Uperesa, Fa'anofa Lisaclaire and Tom Mountjoy, "Global Sport in the Pacific: A Brief Overview," *The Contemporary Pacific: A Journal of Island Affairs*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (2014): 263-280.
- Uperesa, Fa'anofa Lisaclaire, "Fabled Futures: Migration and Mobility for Samoans in American Football," *The Contemporary Pacific: A Journal of Island Affairs*, Vol. 26, No. 2, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press (2014): 281-301.
- Uperesa, Fa'anofa Lisaclaire, "Seeking New Fields of Labor: Football and Colonial Political Economies in American Samoa," *Formations of United States Colonialism*, edited by Alyosha Goldstein, Durham and London: Duke University Press (2014): 207-232.
- Vaitai, Vaitai, "Polynesians in American Schools," *New Neighbours: Islanders In Adaptation*, edited by Cluny Macpherson, Bradd Shore, and Robert Franco, Santa Cruz: Center for South Pacific Studies University of California: 46-53.
- Vang, Chia Youyee, "Hmong Youth, American Football, and the Cultural Politics of Ethnic Sports Tournaments," In *Asian American Sporting Cultures*. Edited by Thangaraj Stanley I., Arnaldo Constancio R., and Chin Christina B. NYU Press, 2016.